

Fortress

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John Brennick drove silently, staring ahead in the twilight as the highway curved in the desert. Karen Brennick also stared ahead, her face grim.

"Are we nearly there?" She cursed herself for asking the question. It reminded her of when she was a little girl, asking her daddy when they would arrive. Her dad had said, Soon, and five minutes later she would ask again, Are we nearly there?

"Soon," John said. The sun had almost set. The lights of the car picked out the bitumen of the road, and the sand to either side.

Thinking of her father made her think of the baby she was carrying. Their child. Once they got through the border to Mexico the baby would be safe.

Even as John spoke, he slowed the car down and stopped behind a line of cars waiting to cross the border. With the sun down, night had fast set in.

"Hell of a way to begin a vacation ..." Karen paused. "Too bad we're not taking one."

"Don't say it. Don't even think it," John said quietly, so quietly she hardly heard him.

"You think I'm scared, Captain?"

He managed a grin. "You're never scared." She smiled tensely back.

"Except when you're scared."

"Then I guess you're scared."

"Then I guess I am."

She looked out of the window, saw people huddled in the shadows under the bridge. Outcasts. Waiting for what? Someone to say, hey, okay buddy, you can cross the bridge now. Mexico's all yours!

She looked up, saw the black silhouette of a border guard patrolling the line of cars. Instinctively, she felt for the flak jacket under her coat. Her protection. It was stencilled "Captain John Brennick. United Nations Army". She pulled her coat tighter, to make sure the jacket was hidden.

"Get the hell out of here," she said to her husband. "We'll both feel better."

"Right."

"I'm fucking serious here. I can take this trip alone."

"No ... no."

She looked at him.

"Anything happens ... Just so you know"

He waved her quiet, saying, "More than life itself."

Then he looked her up and down, in his military way, gave her a nod, as if to say, okay soldier, you've passed muster. She smiled despite herself, and reached over to touch his face.

He smiled back, then froze.

"Look at it, Karen." He pointed to her shoulder. She glanced down and saw the lapel of the flak jacket.

"Shit, I don't know how that happened."

He reached across and fixed it. "Here."

He inspected his work. "Whatever you do, don't raise your arms above your shoulders."

"Guess I can't salute."

He leant over and kissed her. She was about to respond when she remembered not to raise her arms.

"Guess I can't hold you."

"You are holding me." He looked at her belly.

"Just a little tighter, okay?"

"Like that?"

"Exactly like that. Anyone tell you that you are one hell of a lover"

"Yeah. Often – you."

A horn sounded behind them, then more honking. Reluctantly, Brennick turned back towards the road, and inched the car forward. As they neared the bridge, searchlights mounted at its apex shone down on them and the line of cars. A border guard moved past them, shining a torch in each car, looking at the occupants.

They drew nearer, the bridge rising up before them, black, stark, smooth steel rising on either side. Karen saw speakers and video cameras mounted behind the searchlights. The whole barrier area was lit up by huge white down lights. More border guards stood around, at attention, in combat gear, armed with heavy Tasers. A computerized voice blared out continuously, loud enough to penetrate their car.

"Step out of your vehicle. Please step away from it. Take your personal belongings with you for inspection. Leave the car open with keys inside. Thank you."

Karen turned to John. "Check me."

"You're fine."

Suddenly, the car door was jerked open. A border guard put his head in, next to Karen's. "Get out of your car."

John nodded to Karen, opened his door and got out. She stepped out. An icy wind blew around her, trying to penetrate her coat.

John opened the trunk and took out their suitcases, one large and one middle size.

"This way," the guard said, pointing to what looked like a portable airline counter. Behind the counter stood a black suited travel agent, flanked by two more guards.

"Identification." The travel agent sounded bored but his eyes were alert as they inspected Brennick.

John pushed his hand palm down across the counter. The travel agent moved a bar code reader and flashed its light on the code etched into his skin at his wrist. The agent look at his computer screen, on which a menu was displayed: Identity number, date of birth, occupation, salary, travel, shopping receipts. He touched "Travel", and the screen changed. The agent read out, aloud:

"Travel authorization number 111563. Proceed. Next."

Karen put her wrist across the counter. She felt herself holding her breath as the agent used the bar code reader. It seemed to take forever while he checked the computer. Then:

"Proceed."

They moved to the baggage check. John put down their cases on the inspection bench, and the guard behind it smiled and said:

"Yours is the little one, hers is the other. Am I right, or am I right?"

John forced a smile, but said nothing, while the guard opened their bags.

Looking beyond the baggage check, Karen saw a line of women waiting at an inspection point. A border guard was checking a woman. He moved a rod up and down her front, close to her abdomen. The rod emitted a white light, which shone on the woman's belly. He gestured and she moved on. A heavy-set woman took her place. Karen restrained an impulse to check the flak jacket.

"Never known it to fail," the guard said. "Why they gotta change clothes three times in a single –"

A high pitched siren wailed, drowning out the guard. Red lights flashed, and Karen saw two border guards grab the heavy-set woman, who was kicking and screaming at them.

"Goddamn breeders," the baggage guard said to John. Then turned to Karen. "Excuse my language, m'am. You'd think they'd learn."

"Some never do," John said.

"Ain't that the truth."

The guard looked at Karen. "You got the look."

"Excuse me?" She forced herself to breathe evenly.

"If I seen it once, I seen it a hundred times. You women can't help it, can you? All you got to do is see someone with a big belly – you go all mushy."

"Women are women," John said.

"Don't I know it. My wife's the same way." He closed the two bags. "Your turn," he said to Karen, gesturing towards the scanning area.

She nodded to the guard, took a breath, and stiffly walked to the guard with the bio-scanner. She glanced over her shoulder at John, as the guard scanned her belly with the white light. Her mind raced, and she thought of their first child, Michael, now dead. And of their baby she was carrying now. God, suppose the flak jacket didn't work?

She felt John shaking her arm.

"Come on."

She blinked, looked at him, then at the bio-scanner.

"He said you're clear. Proceed. Come on. We don't want to hold up the line." John put his arm around her, and steered her back towards the car. A bright searchlight followed them, as they stepped through piles of goods taken from the surrounding vehicles – kids' toys, juice boxes, a bicycle seat, blankets, pillows.

They reached the car, and John put his bag in the trunk. Karen saw that the back seat was pulled up after the inspection. She opened the back door and reached into the car to push the seat into place. The seat moved, then stopped halfway.

"Goddamn it, move." She pushed down, and as she did so her coat rode down, and part of the flak jacket became exposed at her throat.

"Leave it, honey," John said. "We'll fix it later."

As he spoke, a hand clasped his shoulder.

Karen stood up, and slammed the back door. In standing up she bumped into the guard who had checked their baggage. He held John's shoulder with one hand, and her bag in the other.

"Don't want to leave her favorite dress behind." The guard smiled knowingly, and winked.

"Thanks," John said. "Man, I'm so tired."

The guard's droopy smile switched abruptly to a scowl, as he caught sight of the lapel of the flak jacket jutting out of Karen's coat. He pushed past John, reached for Karen's coat, and tore it open.

"Goddamn fucking flak jacket." Karen stood paralyzed. Before the guard could grab her, John brought down his right hand with all his force in a karate chop to the guard's forearm. There was a crack, as the bone snapped. The guard screamed, and collapsed onto the ground, clutching his arm.

"Run," John shouted, as a siren wailed, and two guards ran towards them, Tasers raised.

He stood his ground. As they neared he kicked up his right foot and solidly collected the first guard in the chest, sending him falling backwards. The other guard swung his arm over John's head, catching him in a headlock. John stomped down on the guard's right foot, dropping down at the same time. The guard let out a yell of pain and released his grip. John spun around and punched him on the side of the chin with his right fist, and got free.

Meanwhile a third guard had grabbed Karen and was attempting to drag her back to the floodlit area. She kned him in the groin, and he doubled up, writhing.

"Quick. Run for it," John yelled, and they both ran across the bridge. John turned his head, to see the black shape of an attack dog silently racing towards them.

"Run. Go." He urged Karen on, while stopping to face the pursuing dog. It launched itself in the air and John could see its open fangs and pink tongue flying towards him. Then the dog hit his body, its momentum knocking him over. He rolled in an effort to get away. The dog growled and sprang again, its teeth snapping. John felt the animal's hot breath on his face, then searing pain as the dog's teeth tore into his cheek. He punched at the dog's snout, and rolled again. The dog released its grip, then fastened its teeth on his arm, snarling.

"Hold it." He heard an amplified voice. "Don't move. You're under arrest."

Bright lights from torches illuminated John and the dog on the ground. He blinked back sweat and blood from his face, and saw through the light several border guards, their guns leveled at him. He signalled with his left arm, and a guard whistled to the dog, which released his right arm, whimpered, and reluctantly moved backwards away from him.

Brennick half rose, and saw no sign of Karen in the darkness across the bridge. She had got away. He smiled, and raised his arm. Immediately a Taser shot him, knocking him unconscious.

The world was full of people. Every new mouth to feed was one too many. In most countries it was illegal to have more than one child. In the United States it was illegal to have an abortion. Those who became pregnant for the second time were jailed and the baby taken from them and reared apart. The babies were programmed, trained to become the jailers.

To cope with the massive numbers of prisoners, huge private penitentiaries were built and owned and operated by three competing organisations. One such was the Men-Tel Corporation, towards whose maximum security prison – the Fortress – Brennick was now travelling, with other new prisoners.

They were in a Prisoner Transport Vehicle, holding fifty prisoners and fifteen guards, plus the driver. The truck roared across the desert, and the prisoners, penned in cages, struggled to glimpse the barren expanse through tiny windows set at head height in the side of the vehicle.

Brennick was crammed with four others in one of ten cages. Outside the wire cages, the guards paced menacingly, occasionally jeering at the prisoners. A nervous balding man, in a dirty business suit, introduced himself as Camper.

"I shouldn't be here," he said. He tugged at Brennick's sleeve. "I know this place. They did a feature on this place. This place is enormous."

"Like your mouth," Nino, a tattooed youth, said.

"It's got no windows—"

"Prisoners," a female voice interrupted Camper. It was a computer voice, and it spoke in a soothing, relaxed tone that set Brennick's nerves on edge.

"Your attention please," the computer said. "You are about to enter the Fortress, a privately owned Maximum Security prison operated by the Men-Tel Corporation. I am Zed-10."

Camper turned his head to each side anxiously, trying to see where the voice was coming from. He said to Brennick, confidently:

"I wasn't supposed to be coming here. So I bounced a couple of checks. For that they give me maximum security?"

"The Fortress is located in a secluded desert," the computer continued. "You will find no arable land. Escape is impossible."

"Sixty days in here I gotta do," Camper said, to no-one in particular.

"That's nada, short term," the boy said. "You're only taking a nap."

"I never nap," Camper said. Then asked Brennick:

"What'd they get you for?"

"My wife was carrying our second child."

"One wasn't enough?" Camper was amazed, and momentarily forgot his own troubles.

"He died at birth."

"Didn't they tie her tubes?" Camper was incredulous.

"They said they did. Guess we got lucky."

"This ain't lucky. What'd they give you?"

"Thirty-one years," Brennick smiled. "I did a little damage before they got me."

"You're smiling. How the fuck can you be smiling?"

"She got away."

Camper grunted, turned to the tiny window, trying to see out. "I shouldn't be here." He scratched at the window with his hands, as if trying to open it. His breathing grew faster, panicky.

"Calm down," Brennick said. "Take a deep breath."

Camper turned an anguished face at Brennick, nodded, and gasped a deep breath. He immediately exhaled, breathing in again shallowly.

"Forget him," Nino said to Brennick. "He's dead."

"He's scared," Brennick corrected.

"The scared don't survive inside," Nino said with conviction.

The truck braked suddenly, jolting to a stop. Brennick gripped the sides of the cage as prisoners bumped into him and each other. He managed to move to the window. Outside he saw a sign, "Men-Tel Corporation", and some ventilating units projecting from the

desert.

The truck slowly moved forward, and downward. Brennick saw they were driving down a ramp.

Then they were passing through huge steel double doors, into a cavernous entrance bay.

A guard stuck his Taser through the cage, nudging Camper's chest.

"Say good-bye to Mister Sun, asshole."

Camper shivered, his face ashen.

The doors started closing behind them, cutting out the desert glare.

"Going ... going ..."

The doors shut with a thudding clang.

"... gone."

The guard withdrew his weapon, and laughed. Camper slumped against the cage, despairing.

After a few more minutes, the truck halted at the loading dock with a revving of its engine that was clearly audible inside the cages. The voice of Zed-10 spoke.

"Prisoners will strip. Leave your clothes on the truck. Remove everything."

The guard cocked his Taser, and the men obediently began to undress. They left their clothes piled on the floor.

"Will we get them back?" Camper asked. The guard laughed again.

"You're going to be fine," Brennick said. He put his hand on Camper's shoulder. The boy rolled his eyes skyward.

The men quickly undressed. Brennick glanced around and surreptitiously slipped his wedding ring into his mouth.

A door in the side of the truck rolled up, and a large cage was swung clanging against the truck, and was attached. The naked prisoners were herded into it, through a scanner, one at a time. As Brennick passed through, an alarm went off.

"Take it out," a guard said, wearily. Brennick, angry, knew there was no point in arguing and opened his mouth, took out the gold wedding ring. The bastards, he thought, but was careful not to show it. "Put it into the shute."

He put the ring into a shute at the side of the gangway, continued on into the cage, and then moved through to the admissions area.

He saw a counter, with a line on the floor about two metres from the line. The naked men stood behind it. There were several television monitors suspended from the ceiling, and guards dressed in black, carrying Tasers, stood on either side. There was nothing else. The walls were painted white.

The computer spoke.

"All prisoners. Your attention, please."

The television monitors lit up and a middle-aged man appeared, speaking to them.

"Welcome to the Fortress. Everything here is the property of the Men-Tel Corporation. Including you. I am Prison Director Poe. I run your productive, efficient and therapeutic new home. The Federal Government pays Men-Tel \$27 every day for each one of us. They expect us to put you to use, expanding our facility.

"The Fortress is alive 24 hours a day. Your work shift will be determined by our computer, Zed-10. You will learn to live without day or night.

"I have ears which can hear anything said throughout the Fortress."

The screen shifted to an image of an electronic machine with multiple lenses and microphones.

"This is a sensor in our Psychological Security Intelligence System – you will know it as a PSIS."

The image returned to Poe's face, in close up. "Your thoughts will be with me, always."

The image faded, and the computer voice of Zed-10 spoke.

"Prisoners will prepare for intestination."

A hush fell on the men, and the guards ushered a prisoner to the counter.

"Prepare Intestinator Tagging."

A metal mask descended, imprisoning the man's head, holding it in such a way that the skull could not move.

"Commence Intestinator Tagging."

Brennick could not see precisely what happened next, but the prisoner began to shake

his arms and legs helplessly. Then the metal mask unlocked, releasing the man, and rose up a foot. The man shook himself, rubbing his ears, and was moved on to make way for the next prisoner. Each prisoner was forced to the counter, the mask descended, and the process of intestination took place. Most men, like the first, shook violently and helplessly before the metal mask released them. Some stood stoically, arms motionless at their side. Finally, it was Brennick's turn.

He walked to the counter and placed his hands flat on its surface. The mask descended, and his head was firmly held. He felt pads grip his ears, his forehead and the back of his head. In front of him, a machine like a giant borer or electric drill approached his face, and forced itself into his mouth. Pincers within the drill opened, and his mouth and jaws were spread open, almost tearing his cheeks. Desperately he tried to struggle free. He understood why the men lashed their arms about. It was useless.

Suddenly, a searing pain burned his throat, and he felt like gagging as some metallic solid was pushed down his throat. As suddenly, the mask lifted, and he was freed.

"This way," a guard said. He moved over to join the others, rubbing his head. Camper, who had preceded him, whimpered as he came up.

"I don't think I can take this."

Brennick ignored him.

There were seven more prisoners, until finally each prisoner had been intestinated.

"Activate Intestimators," Zed-10 said. They shrank back in anticipation, but whatever was involved in activating the devices had no immediate effect that they could detect.

Poe reappeared on the monitors. "You have now been outfitted with Intestimators, Men-Tel's automatic behaviour control device. Observe all rules. Be especially observant of the yellow and red lines. Crossing a yellow line will result in pain. Crossing a red line will result in death.

"Crime does not pay."

The screen darkened, and a group of trustees filed in, carrying prison garments. Each prisoner was given his garb – a jumpsuit – plus a towel and a blanket. Brennick and Nino were given orange jumpsuits. Other prisoners were issued with different colours. He put on his uniform, and noticed how some life returned to the subdued men as soon as they had clothes on again.

Camper, white-faced, tried to catch the attention of a trustee, clutching at his arm.

"I have an illness. It's called claustrophobia."

The trustee ignored him. Camper turned, and walked towards another, near a yellow line.

"It's a real illness." His face was sallow, his forehead covered in sweat. He walked stiffly, stopping and starting.

"Remain on line. Do not cross the yellow line," said Zed-10.

"I had a note from my doctor." Camper was oblivious to everything. His voice rose in panic.

"Yellow is pain."

"I can't stay in here," he screamed. All the prisoners stood immobile, watching the frightened man. Camper kept walking, turning this way and that to find someone who would listen. He crossed the yellow line.

Brennick heard a shrill whistle coming from within Camper.

"Your Intestinator is now in pain mode."

Camper stumbled forward, fell to his knees writhing in pain. The Intestinator's whistle grew louder.

Nino watched Camper. His street tough mask dropped, revealing a young boy, terrified. "Madre Dio," he said.

"Do not cross the red line. Red is death," Zed-10's soothing feminine voice spoke.

Brennick watched helplessly, furiously, as Camper's writhing moved him towards the red line. He glared at the PSIS, and yelled at it.

"You can turn it off. God damn you to hell, turn it off."

Camper, on the ground, thrashed his arms, the whistle growing louder still. His head jerked forward, touching the red line. He clutched his stomach, which bulged, protruding a good two inches. Camper tried to hold the bulge. The whistle jumped ten decibels, deafening them. His body started to blister and bubble.

"Your Intestinator is now in death mode."

With a voiceless scream, Camper the intestinator exploded in his stomach. Flesh and blood spurted from his belly, spraying the nearer trustees. The whistling stopped. There

was a sweetish smell of blood and shit in the air.

In the dead silence, no-one moved. Then Nino turned to Brennick.

"I told you. Dead on arrival."

"Say a prayer."

"Not worth my breath."

Brennick turned his back on the boy in disgust.

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The trustees quickly ushered the men away from the devastating scene. They were herded near the edge of the platform, and the whole of the Fortress was exposed to their view. Looking down, Brennick peered into the depths of an abyss.

The prison was like a cut open beehive, at least 30 storeys deep. At each level open cells faced from the circumference into the centre, separated by empty space from a service spine down which elevators ran. Also on the central spine were enormous remote controlled guns, mounted on tracks, which moved up and down the core. Looking up, he saw giant fans above them, circulating the air.

The men all bunched together, looking around apprehensively, waiting for instructions. Brennick smiled to himself. He might be trapped, but Karen at least had escaped. And, he decided, whatever humans had built, even if they used the most sophisticated machinery, humans could defeat. Somewhere in the complexity would be the seed for escape.

First he had to learn as much about the Fortress as possible. Knowledge would be the only way to fight it. And knowledge would be hard to come by, he realised.

The trustees herded the prisoners across a bridge, providing a walkway over the chasm below, to the central core. There was no railing. They kept to the middle, avoiding the sheer drop to either side, and moved on into an open elevator. The bridge started to retract back into the core as the elevator doors closed. Once shut, they descended rapidly. The elevator had glass walls and they could see the levels of the prison appear to rise up on each side.

"New prisoners," said Zed-10. "Please observe the Neutron Canons found at the Fortress core. They destroy only organic matter."

The elevator stopped, and another retractable bridge slowly emerged from the core and extended to the edge of the cell blocks. The elevator doors opened, and Brennick saw a PSIS suspended above the cells opposite.

Prisoners were taken out.

The elevator doors shut, and opened again at the next level.

"Prisoners Brennick and Gomez get off here please."

Another bridge extended, and Brennick and Nino walked across it. Again, both men kept to the middle.

"Please follow the PSIS," said Zed-10. Above them, they saw the sensing device, mounted on its track. A green light glowed underneath it. It moved, and Brennick and Nino followed.

The bridge retracted behind them. That's one escape route that's going to be difficult, Brennick thought.

Around the cells groups of prisoners stared at the newcomers. Some deliberately paid no attention. Some made unambiguous gestures. Hatred and anger burned in some eyes. Pain and despair in others.

"Up these stairs, please," the computer voice softly said.

Brennick led the way. He saw that at each level served by the elevator there were three further levels of cells. The PSIS stopped at a cell. "Please enter," Zed-10 said. Brennick saw that the cell was already occupied by three men. They lounged and stared unwelcomingly at Brennick and Nino. The largest looked to be in his thirties, and was about Brennick's height, but heavy set. He had a short beard and moustache and his head was shaven. One way to hide baldness, thought Brennick, summing him up as a bully. He had deep-set eyes that glared coldly at the two of them. Then there was a scrawny man – in his late twenties, guessed Brennick – who wore wire-rimmed glasses and a look of surrender. He's scared, Brennick thought. The last lay on a bunk, a dark man, dignified and calm, who did not respond to Brennick's questioning stare.

There were no bars to the cells, yet none of the three ventured past the doorway. Brennick noticed faint lights beaming across the entrance. The largest prisoner scowled at

the newcomers.

"Hey, Big Mama – whoa. We ain't taking any more in here. No fucking way. You stay the fuck out. We got a crowd in here already." He seemed to be talking more for the benefit of Brennick and Nino – or possibly his cellmates – than for Zed-10.

Zed-10's voice over-rode him.

"Complaining is a violation."

"So's overcrowding," said the small man with glasses.

"Intestination will commence in five seconds. ... four ..."

"Come on, man," the small man said.

"Three ..."

"Hey. It's all right, Big Mama. The more the merrier." The large prisoner smiled ingratiatingly at the PSIS. Then said quietly out of the side of his mouth:

"Bitch."

Zed-10 stopped counting. "Prisoners 915763 and 915764. Five seconds to enter cell."

Brennick strode in, and Nino followed.

"What happens if we just walked out of here?" Nino asked. His anxiety showed beneath his swagger.

The big man grinned. "Try it."

Nino shrugged and moved towards the entrance. Before he could get closer to the doorway, Brennick lunged and grabbed him by the collar, jerking him back.

"Fuck is your problem?" Nino snarled, all his street dignity threatened. Brennick made no reply, but grabbed the towel from Nino's hands and flicked it towards the doorway. The edge intersected the faint light beam, and wffff, was instantly burnt to a crisp.

"Smart, Fish. Very smart," the big man said. He looked them both over. "Two of you have got to pay the rent."

Brennick looked at him politely. "I do my own time."

"There's all kinds of time. Think about it. You don't pay the rent, me and Maddox are gonna come get it."

"That you?" Brennick asked the younger prisoner. He shook his head vigorously.

"Maddox," said the big man, "is hard to miss. Look for 187, tattooed on his forehead. You know what 187 means, Fish?"

"It can't be your IQ."

"It's the murder statute," Nino interjected. "He's doing the Big Bitch."

"So maybe you want to pay the rent after all."

Nino's voice rose in pitch. "Your gorilla's not the only 187 around here. I got my own axe rap. My lawyer says they got to wait till I'm eighteen to execute me. In two years, I get to bite the green apple."

Brennick looked up to the still, dark man, who had watched the scene without expression. He introduced himself.

"Brennick. John."

The man looked at him, but made no reply. Brennick moved closer to the scrawny prisoner, and repeated:

"John Brennick."

"D-Day." The man paused. "That's Abraham," he muttered. The dark man now nodded slightly.

"And Stiggs." The man who ran the cell stared at Brennick contemptuously, and shrugged his shoulders.

D-Day indicated the floor. "Anywhere you like."

Brennick threw his blanket and towel into a corner at the back of the cell. Nino did the same.

"Hey, pretty boy," Stiggs said. "Your culo's as sweet as your face, you can bunk with me."

"Try it, you're dead, motherfuck."

"I can wait." Stiggs turned and called to the cellblock. "Hey, Maddox. Just got us some sweet young pussy. Speaks Spanish. Very pretty."

A low voice full of energy answered. "Keep your cock in your pants, Stiggs. I'm the cherry popper round here, and don't forget it."

The feminine voice of Zed-10 intruded. "Sixty seconds to lights out."

Brennick stretched out on the floor, wondering about Maddox. He saw Abraham half

sit up, and look down at him.

"Don't dream," he said. The lights dimmed, went out.

Brennick lay back, reflecting. What did that mean – Don't dream? His dreams were not going to be extinguished, that was for sure. At least Karen was safe. He could endure almost anything for her.

Thinking of her, he fell asleep. Sometime later he dreamed.

A PSIS glided past the cell, halted, and shone a sensory probe onto his head. Up in his eyrie, on top of the Fortress, Director Poe watched a screen in his control room, which displayed the results of the PSIS probe of Brennick.

John reached out for Karen, across the expanse of a large white bed, a bottle of champagne protruding from under a discarded wedding dress. She came slowly into his arms, kissed him hungrily, lay on top of him, then sat up, legs on either side of him. John reached up to cradle her head, moved his arms down her shoulders to her breasts, under a white shift. The shift was silken soft, and he held the soft skin of her breasts beneath it. He kissed her, and her tongue played with his in his mouth, her lips nibbling him.

John raised the shift, and nuzzled his head between her breasts. He licked the nipples, their softness filling his mouth. She giggled, and said throatily, "I want your baby". He played with her breasts, watching the nipples harden, until she clasped his head and brought it up to hers, kissing him and hugging him. He clasped her buttocks, and her body moved against his, the skin of her body warm and firm under his fingers. Lifting his head he smiled at her, and they kissed. He felt the sweat and the salt and the heat, and they were one heaving mass, and where he stopped and she began had no meaning.

The voice of Zed-10 spoke to Poe, who was absorbed in watching Brennick kissing Karen's breasts.

"You're enjoying this."

"Yes. I suppose that I am." Poe stared at the screen.

"Your function is to monitor and control. We do not observe for personal pleasure."

"You don't understand pleasure. Or pain. I do."

"It is time for pain."

"I am afraid it is."

Poe bent over his control panel, pressed a button.

Karen nuzzled his shoulder then raised herself above him. She shook her hair and smiled down at him, opened her mouth to speak, and in harsh masculine tones said:

"This is an unauthorized thought process."

At the same time, a searing pain jolted Brennick awake. He clutched his stomach, sweat beading on his brow, and despite himself bellowed in agony.

The PSIS shut off its Sensory Laser.

His cries woke the others, and Stiggs spoke with undisguised pleasure.

"Got a stomach ache, Fish? Indigestion maybe?"

Brennick ignored him, forcing himself to breathe slowly, an old relaxation technique that helped the pain ease. He saw Abraham glance at his belly, and then up to the stationary PSIS. Brennick nodded, comprehending. Somehow the PSIS had gotten in to his dream. What was it that the voice had said? Not an authorized thought process. How did it know? Did it monitor every dream in the whole 30 storeys? Surely that wasn't possible.

The PSIS glided away down its track.

"They check all the new ones," Abraham said. "And anyone Poe has an interest in." Neither Nino nor D-Day said anything. Brennick pulled his blanket up, and tried to sleep.

Morning distinguished itself from night by an increase in the background lighting. Brennick had no idea of the time.

A panel at the rear of the cell slid up to reveal a functional toilet, and Stiggs quickly relieved himself into it. Abraham followed, then D-Day. Nino and Brennick stood back.

D-Day spoke. "Use it while you can. You don't get too many opportunities."

Brennick took his place, urinated readily. Then Nino, who squatted.

One thing was for sure, Brennick thought to himself. Whether in the army or in prison, shit was shit.

A short time later, the laser lights that barred them in were extinguished, and Zed-10's voice spoke throughout the jail.

"You have 12 minutes for breakfast. Follow the line."

Everyone moved swiftly, silently, to an area on the circumference of their level, where benches with tables were placed. Each table seated ten, and on each sat a mug of coffee, a bowl of some sort of porridge, and a curved biscuit. All the men quickly sat down, using the biscuit as an eating utensil. Brennick followed suit. The food was bland and sweet. Probably oats. He saw that after eating the porridge other prisoners dunked their biscuits in the coffee and ate them.

On the whole, probably vitamin enriched and nutritious, according to the appropriate government standard – one Brennick was familiar with from the UN.

"What are you here for?" Brennick asked D-Day.

"My business," D-Day said, and stuffed porridge into his mouth.

"And Stiggs?"

"Assault," Stiggs interjected from the next table. He spoke casually, and Brennick picked up the threat underlying his tone. "Assault with a weapon. Assault without a weapon. Theft. Tell you about it, sometime."

Brennick ignored him. "What about you?" he asked Abraham.

"You got too many questions, my man," Abraham muttered.

"Questions mean I can find out what's going on in this place."

"Yeah, well, questions can also mean your health is not so good."

Brennick nodded. He knew that Abraham was just giving him good advice. You had to mind your own business, if you didn't want others to mind it for you. But sooner or later, he knew from the army, everyone spilled their guts. It was just a matter of time, and a matter of the right opportunity.

After the meal, they were herded down the central lift to the base of the jail, where crude earthworks were in progress. Brennick and his cellmates were given miners' helmets with lights, and picks and shovels with which to dig into the rock and clay. They were extending the jail. Momentarily Brennick thought, why not use machines? And realised that the labour probably kept many of the men sane.

The tracks that the PSIS machines ran on ended at the construction site, and several black-suited warders stood stiffly in the background, with Tasers held casually, watching the men.

As Brennick wielded his pick, a man with a large tank strapped to his back shuffled by, his eye vacant. The other prisoners ignored him completely, except to draw a drink of water from his tank. Brennick took some.

"Thanks," he said, but the man made no reply. There was drool at his lips, which the man ignored. He simply waited, then slowly moved on to the next group of prisoners.

"What's with him?" Brennick asked D-Day.

"He's a ghost. Got himself mind-wiped. Tried to escape. Big mistake."

"The mistake is when you don't make it."

"Nobody makes it." D-Day shook his head.

"Don't believe everything they tell you."

As he spoke, Brennick heard a shout from down the slope, at the edge of the diggings.

"Fuck yourself, asshole." He heard Nino's voice.

Brennick glanced around, then moved towards the voices, only to run into Stiggs, obviously acting as a guard.

"Private party," Stiggs said, baring his teeth in a grin. He flexed his shoulders, pumped up his chest and danced on the balls of his feet, challenging Brennick.

Brennick glanced around, taking in the scene, and saw that Stiggs had put himself in a

spot where the ground sloped behind him. He quickly pushed him sideways and down. Stiggs lost balance and stumbled backwards. Brennick kept moving, and saw an enormous inmate grappling with Nino, forcing him into the ground. He pulled down Nino's jumpsuit and spread his legs.

"Your ass is mine, faggot," he said. He pinioned Nino's face against a large rock with one hand, and jerked down his own jumpsuit with the other, exposing his cock. It was erect, and for such a large man quite short.

Brennick slammed into his side, punching a sharp rabbit killer to his left kidney. The giant released Nino, whirling round in disbelief. Brennick saw the number 187 tattooed on his forehead, and landed a right to his cheek, against the side of his nose. Nino scrambled to his feet, pulling up his jumpsuit.

The giant picked Brennick up under his arms, and hurled him onto a pile of rocks, knocking the wind out of him. Pebbles and dust were knocked loose, and fell onto his face, as the man came in to kick him.

Several PSIS, meanwhile, had raced to the end of their track, triggering the combatants' intestinations.

Brennick, dazed from being flung onto the rock heap, again felt a searing pain in his stomach, at the same time seeing the giant stop in mid-kick to fall writhing on the dirt. Looking across, he saw Nino also gasping in pain.

Guards appeared, and grabbed the men, shoving them roughly into a lift at the central core. The lift shot up to the top of the Fortress, and they were taken through a winding corridor, eventually ending up in a large room with a mass of electronic equipment strewn throughout it.

The three men were placed on three slightly raised platforms, and immediately laser bars shone down, caging them. Three PSIS monitored them.

The laser beams narrowed, forcing Brennick to stand taller, so that his body did not touch the burning light. Video cameras were trained on the three men, and monitors throughout the complex showed the three sweating bodies.

Zed-10 spoke. "Prisoners 727675, 915763 and 915764, you will only be released from solitary when the perpetrator is revealed."

"Fuck you," said the giant.

"You must be Maddox," Brennick said.

"Fuck you, too," said Maddox.

"Prisoners will not talk amongst themselves."

Out of the corner of his eye, Brennick saw Nino sway slightly. "I can't stand any more," he said.

"Then fry," said Maddox.

Sweat ran down Nino's face. He started to undo his jumpsuit in a vain effort to cool himself.

"You can do it," Brennick whispered.

Nino swayed again, and his forearm touched the laser bars. He jerked his arm back with a howl of pain. He looked hopelessly at Brennick.

"Shit."

"Think about being strong," Brennick said, trying to keep his voice calm.

"I am." He swayed again. "I'm not going to make it, man."

"You tell," Maddox said, "and you're dead, cholo."

"Shut your mouth," Brennick said.

"Gonna shut yours – permanently." Maddox said. He meant it.

"Prisoner 915764, are you ready to identify the perpetrator?"

Nino's face stiffened in fear. "No." He swayed again, almost touching the bars.

"Prisoner 915764, who started the incident," Zed-10 repeated.

Nino clenched his fists, stared at Maddox.

"It was" Maddox drew his finger slowly across his neck, then jerked it back in a slashing gesture. He mouthed the word "Dead".

Nino gulped. "It was" Again his voice trailed off. He swallowed, panting.

"Who started the incident?"

Nino licked his lips. "It was—"

"I did it," Brennick interrupted. "It was me."

The laser bars switched off, and Nino slumped to the floor. Brennick and Maddox stood without moving.

"Prisoner Brennick. Report to Director Poe immediately."

Two guards marched up to Brennick, and dragged him out of the chamber, down the corridor and through another door into a chamber like some sort of living room. There was carpet, a couch, wood or woodlike panelling, drapes. A print of The Hunt hung next to a window, and the room was lit with soft light. A man sat at a glass table, dressed entirely in white, his face half lathered in shaving cream. His face was familiar – Poe. Behind him stood another man, in a green gown. Brennick stared disbelievingly.

"I think you already know trustee Abraham," Poe said.

Behind him, through the window, Brennick could see the rest of the Fortress.

Soft music played. What was it? A string quartet? Mozart?

Poe regarded Brennick, then signalled to the guards. They released him, and withdrew to stand by the door.

"Sit down, 915763."

"My name is Brennick."

"Of course it is. Do make yourself comfortable."

He remained standing.

Poe shrugged in his chair. Abraham adjusted the towel under his chin and began shaving him, with a cut-throat razor.

Brennick glared at Abraham, who refused to meet his eyes. Poe observed Brennick's anger.

"I believe you are acquainted with Abraham. He is the very best of our trustees. I have written some excellent parole recommendations, but, in all honesty, I do not know what I would do if Abraham were to leave us.

"Look out my window, would you." Brennick made no move.

"Please." Poe continued. "So much suffering and sadness. You could help me end all that."

"That's easy," Brennick said. "Treat us like men."

"You are a man, Brennick. But those ..." Poe gestured towards the prison outside his window. "Those are animals. The time they spend in here is the only useful time of their entire lives. They need a leader. You could be that leader."

"I'm nobody's stooge." He spoke with quiet emphasis.

"Stooge? The most decorated Captain in the history of the Black Berets. But you quit in disgrace. Lost an entire platoon, I believe."

"No business of yours," said Brennick, furious.

"So touchy! Hmm. I suppose that is understandable. Still, you would not want to lose this particular soldier, would you?"

Poe touched a button on the console at his fingers, and a monitor flickered on, displaying women, obviously pregnant, in a shower. The PSIS camera slowly zoomed in on one of the women, revealing Karen. Her prison number automatically displayed at the bottom of the screen.

Brennick suppressed a gasp of shock, and felt an awful sinking in his stomach. How had they captured her?

He forced himself to answer slowly.

"Noooo," he said.

"We caught her before she got to the far side of the bridge. The law is clear: one child per woman. We live on a small and very fragile planet. We must find a way to maintain the population balance. Abortion is illegal. Which leaves only one other alternative.

"Do you understand what I am saying, Brennick? You are not under sentence of death. But your wife is."

Brennick tore his eyes from the monitor to face Poe.

"She really is quite beautiful," Poe said. Brennick looked at the monitor again, as Karen soaped her breasts and neck.

"It would be a terrible pity ..." He paused, turned to look at Brennick. "Intestate Karen Brennick."

On the screen, Brennick saw Karen fall to the shower room floor, clutching her

stomach. Without thought he lunged at Poe, who calmly pressed a button on the console.

"Zed," Poe said.

Immediately Brennick felt the same tearing in his guts he had felt before, and despite all his efforts he succumbed to the agony. He fell writhing to the floor.

"Intestination commencement," said Zed-10, perhaps unnecessarily.

"I don't think you appreciate your predicament, Mr Brennick," Poe said. "You have nothing. You have nowhere to hide. You are nothing."

"Then why," Brennick said, gasping through his pain, "why are you afraid of me?"

"Do not make the mistake of thinking I am afraid of you." Poe pushed another button.

Instantly Brennick's pain ceased. He lay on the floor, catching his breath. "You're the one who's made the mistake," he said.

6

Karen sat on her heels facing her cellmate Lydia. She eyed Lydia's bulging belly. God, she must have only two weeks left. Lydia was given to talking.

"What I hear is they sell 'em. To rich people, can't have a baby of their own."

Karen nodded. "They were having a garage sale, we'd be in some goddamn home, chintz curtains on the windows. Make us cute." Karen paused. "This ain't cute."

"They said they'd take care of me."

"Well, they sure as shit are doing that."

"You got a real mouth on you." Lydia said, pretending to be shocked.

"Sorry. I was a soldier. The army is where I met my husband."

A PSIS glided past, halted overhead.

"That's the dirtiest word in the English language." Lydia laughed bitterly.

"You mean 'husband?'" Karen raised an eyebrow.

"Who do you think turned me in?" Lydia said.

A medical trustee arrived, a stethoscope around his neck.

"How are you ladies doing this evening?" he said, smiling at the two in that false way doctors always smiled at patients.

"Who the fuck are you?" Karen asked.

"I'm your doctor, my dear. In the world, I had a little problem with all the goodies I could prescribe. So now I take care of charming women who are growing children for Men-Tel."

He wore half moon glasses, and he peered over the rims at the two women.

"Now, are we following our diets?"

"What if we don't?" Karen asked.

"They force feed you," Lydia answered for him.

The medico spoke to Karen. "You see how healthy your companion is. How close she is to term."

He pulled up Lydia's smock and held his stethoscope to her belly. The skin was stretched taut, almost translucent, stretched over another living person, she thought.

"Very good. Very good." The trustee was genuinely pleased.

"We want to know what happens to our children," Karen said.

"Shhhhhh," he said, inserting a thermometer under Lydia's tongue, and taking her pulse. "Don't you worry your little heads about anything at all. Men-Tel is completely in control."

In his cellblock, at mealtime, Brennick took a plastic tray and sat down next to Abraham and Nino, feeling dejected, helpless. Behind him, two tables away he noticed Maddox eating, but decided to ignore him.

Nino wanted to talk about the laser cages. "I fucked up. Couldn't stand the pain."

"I know," Brennick said, then glanced towards Maddox. "Better watch out."

Nino cast his eyes down. He was terrified, but it scarcely registered on Brennick, who turned to Abraham.

"Where do they keep the women?"

"Don't even think about it," Abraham said in his soft, deep voice.

"Why? You going to give your boss a report?"

Abraham gestured discretely, and following the movement of his hand Brennick noted a PSIS.

"He's got his 'little sisters'," Abraham said. He laughed. "He doesn't need me."

"Where's the women section?" Brennick repeated, quietly.

"I'm not going to die inside." Abraham stared at his plastic tray.

"You'll die right here, if you don't tell me." He made sure that Abraham heard the desperation in his voice.

"Ain't that a bitch," Abraham shook his head. "Two days. Two fucking days, and you're just like everybody else in here."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Fuck you." Abraham chewed on the last of his food, as if debating with himself what he should do. Finally he shook his head again and muttered:

"Levels A and B."

Brennick looked up to the top of the central core. It was a huge, unbridgeable space.

7

Karen slept in her cell, a troubled, disturbed sleep. She assumed John was in the prison, but had no way of learning how he was. Her child within – thinking of Lydia, so close to term, brought home the awful horror of what she and her baby faced in so few months' time. In her fitful sleep she saw her baby smiling. Goo goo, she said. Mama. Mama. Then her face screwed up and she began crying. Mummy, her daughter cried, reaching out for her. Mummy. As she stooped to comfort her, her child receded, just beyond her grasp. She reached out further, and the baby receded further, becoming smaller. Mummy, she cried.

Karen sat up, her heart beating. Lydia was crying.

"What is it?" she said, trying to shake her dream from her head.

"The baby's kicking. I can feel her kicking."

"That's fine. It's natural."

"I just want to hold my baby." Lydia sobbed, then made an effort and spoke a little more calmly. "For a little while, even. I know I can't keep her. But just to see it open its eyes..."

Karen felt helpless. "I know," was all she could say. She got up and put her arm around Lydia.

"I'm not going to let them take my baby." Lydia said with determination. She had shed her little girl inflections.

A PSIS glided by overhead, stopping at their cell. Karen sweetened her voice. "Why Lydia, you know Men-Tel will be a good mother to your baby."

In the distance they heard the sound of footsteps.

"It's right for them to take our children," Karen said in her false, sweet voice. "It's wrong of us to disobey the law."

The footsteps grew louder, and the medical trustee, with three assistants, reached their cell.

Lydia's reaction was immediate. She shrank into the corner, curling up to make herself as small as possible.

"Aw, no. No. No," she said.

Zed-10's calm voice spoke. How the fuck did they make it sound so soothing?

"Remove number 912873."

The laser bars of the cell vanished as they were switched off. The trustee smiled outside, ready to enter, his assistants behind him.

Karen whispered to Lydia. "When I've got his attention, run." Then she spoke to the trustee.

"Could you look at me first. I've been having these pains."

The medical trustee walked into the cell, and up to her. "Let's take a listen, shall we?" he said.

He raised Karen's smock and placed his stethoscope against her still-flat belly. Lydia slowly stood up, then raced out of the cell into the yard. Karen kneed the trustee as hard as she could in the groin. He bent over double, gasping in pain.

Two of the assistants ran after Lydia, and Karen grabbed the third by his right arm, twisting it behind his back.

The medical trustee meanwhile staggered to his feet, and punched Karen on her upper arms, to make her let go.

Lydia reached the railing separating the yard from the giant drop to the bottom of the Fortress, and swung one leg over.

One of the assistants dived and seized her leg as she started to tumble over the railing. The other reached over and grabbed her arms, pulling her back onto the safety of the yard. They started dragging her away down the yard to the corridor.

"Your babies are the property of the Men-Tel Corporation," Zed-10 said. "Crime does not pay."

When she saw that Lydia had been captured, Karen gave up her own struggle. The medical trustee tightened his grip on her arms, and twisted her skin savagely.

"I knew you were trouble, the minute I laid eyes on you," he said, and pushed her down onto her bunk. The trustee surveyed the cell briefly, then left to follow his assistants.

"Aren't you going to take her things?" Karen shouted after the retreating men. "Or isn't she going to need them?"

8

The next morning, the laser bars in Brennick's cell switched off, and Zed-10 spoke its morning instruction.

"Cellblock F Orange, report to construction."

The men began to pour out of their cells, and start down the stairs past another cellblock that was still dark. Their laser bars glowed in the dimness. Obviously a night shift crew, thought Brennick.

He paused by the railing and stared up to where he figured Karen must be.

"Little Sister's watching," D-Day said quietly.

Glancing up, he saw that there was indeed a PSIS gliding past, about to focus on him. Before it stopped he moved back from the railing, to merge with the others. As he joined the throng he heard running feet, and before he could turn around he was hit with a huge crunch that sent him flying backwards into the wall. He relaxed his body, keeping his head forward so that the full flat of his back took the impact, lessening the blow.

Half-winded, he looked up to see Maddox charging at him, fists raised to strike.

"Rise and fucking shine, asshole," he screamed.

Whether it was instinct or training that saved him he didn't know, but he rolled, missing the worst of Maddox' punch. Furious, Maddox reached down and pulled him up and heaved him against the cellblock wall. This time Brennick felt blinding pain as his head struck the wall, but he managed to fasten onto Maddox' shoulders, so that each time Maddox shoved him against the wall, he was able to cushion the shock.

Maddox twisted him around, slowly forcing his head towards the laser bars of the adjoining cell. The sleeping inmates inside woke up as the two straining men moved closer to the lasers.

Brennick exerted all his force, but felt himself compelled inexorably to move in slow motion towards the laser bars. Suddenly he smelt a whiff of burning hair and the side of his face seared in pain. In the same instant he relaxed all his opposition and twisted sideways. Maddox fell towards the laser bars and released his grip on Brennick to avoid them. Brennick immediately brought his hand up in a savage chop that hit Maddox' nose. There was the sharp crack of a bone breaking. Brennick rolled away, and Maddox' hand crossed the laser grid. He let out a scream and charged at Brennick.

Up in his command suite, Poe watched on his monitors as the two battled each other.

"Shall I intestinate?" Zed-10 asked.

"No," Poe said. He gazed at the screen, fascinated. "No."

He watched Brennick deliver a right cross to the charging Maddox' face, then a left punch to his jaw.

Maddox staggered in mid charge, and stumbled back while Brennick advanced on him. Then, with sheer, brute strength, Maddox grabbed the smaller man and lifted him above his head as if he were a rag doll.

Poe watched, excited, as Maddox hurled Brennick over the railing.

Brennick landed on the retractable bridge linking the yard to the central core. He lay motionless, winded, for at least a second, at the edge of the bridge, inches from the abyss. Gasping for breath, he crouched, trying to stand up, when Maddox came lumbering after him, and kicked him in the ribs. The impact sent him skidding to the other side of the bridge. Desperately he tried to grip onto the metal surface to prevent himself sliding off the edge. His fingertips burned from the friction, and he slowed down, halting at the edge, his face over the abyss so that he could see way down to the tiny lights at the bottom.

He rolled over, began to sit up, only to see Maddox towering over him, kicking him hard in the ribs, trying to push him off the bridge. He rolled with the kick, only to have Maddox land another kick in his back. Again he rolled, and this time, as the kick came, caught the foot and jerked upwards with all his strength, tipping Maddox flat on his back, with a mighty thump. He scrambled to his feet, backing away from the prone Maddox, who now rolled over and sprang to his feet. Brennick ran at the larger man as he was getting up, knocking him sideways. Maddox grabbed him, however, before he could draw back and they fell together, rolling at the edge of the bridge.

Up on level B Red, the sound of the fight and prisoners cheering each of the two men on brought the women to the edge of their cellblock. Karen moved with them. As she got to the rail and looked down someone yelled in her ear.

"A Fish going after the Gorilla."

Down below she made out two tiny figures wrestling on the bridge linking the cells with the central block. She peered intently, trying to make out who the two men were. Yes, one was clearly the big man known as the Gorilla. And the other? She couldn't make him out. A Fish, the woman had shouted. Could it be John?

Also watching the fight was Commander Poe, on his monitor up in central control. He saw that Brennick was now underneath Maddox, and that Maddox had succeeded in pushing Brennick's head and shoulders over the edge, his hand at Brennick's throat. "Retract the bridge," he said. The movement of the bridge was a shock to the two men. Maddox, from his position of strength, his left hand pushing Brennick's head backhand down, growled gleefully. "Die," he said.

Summoning up his last energies, Brennick forced his right hand up and thrust his first two fingers into Maddox' eyes.

Yowling with pain, Maddox relaxed his grip, and Brennick rolled from under, forcing the Gorilla to the edge. With a wild swing, attempting to grab hold of Brennick, Maddox stumbled and fell.

His swinging arm caught the side of the bridge, and he gripped on to a steel beam, bringing his other hand up so that his fingers hung onto the top of the edge of the bridge.

Brennick wearily stood up, and took two steps so that he stood over the dangling Maddox. He looked down and saw terror in his eyes.

From hidden speakers he heard Poe's voice, speaking not just to the two of them, but to all the prisoners.

"Stop retraction."

The bridge ceased its motion, leaving about a metre on which Brennick stood, and Maddox hung.

"77675 is no longer of any use. I have a death warrant in his name. Execute it, 915763."

Brennick stared up to where he knew Central Control was, trying to see Poe. He could just make out a shadow at the window on the top level, overlooking them. Slowly, he shook his head. No.

"That is an order," Poe said.

In reply, Brennick bent down to Maddox, noting the men standing across the abyss in the cellblock yard, all staring silently at him and the dangling Maddox, trying to work out what Brennick would do.

He glanced up and saw the women on level B, a blur of faces. Then he looked down into the staring eyes of Maddox, full of hatred and fear. He reached down, and seized Maddox by the arm and pulled. He felt a sudden unbearable strain on his wrist and elbow joints as he took Maddox' weight, then heaved and got Maddox' shoulder up to the level of the bridge. He kept pulling and the Gorilla brought his other hand up onto the bridge. The giant torso was half on, half off. Brennick felt himself slipping, and pulled with all his might. At the same time Maddox pushed his left arm and swung his body onto the bridge.

He stood up, helping Maddox to stand next to him.

"Your sentimentality is touching –" Poe's voice came through the speakers – but quite foolish, Brennick. Prisoners – a demonstration."

The two men, backs to the central wall at the edge of the bridge, saw a splatter gun spin and lock into position. There was the barest sound of a whoosh, like someone blowing out

a candle. Then a sickening boom, and a gaping hole was blown through Maddox, splattering Brennick with warm wetness. A red mist drifted around them, and Maddox looked down in surprise at the donut of his missing centre.

Maddox opened his mouth, as if to say something, but only a croaking came. He looked puzzled, raised his arms forwards, then slowly fell sideways, off the bridge and down. All was quiet.

"You fucking asshole," Brennick shouted in the silence, and saw the splatter gun swing towards him.

"John," he heard a faint call from above. Karen's voice. He looked up, shouting defiantly, hopelessly:

"I'm getting you out of here, Karen."

His shout released pandemonium in the crowd of prisoners.

"Brennick. Brennick. Brennick," they shouted, starting with a few but building up into a scream as all the prisoners joined in, banging the cell walls, jostling the trustees.

"Brennick. Brennick. Brennick."

"Intestinate John Brennick," Poe said. "Prisoners. Back to your cells."

Brennick felt the searing pain, and collapsed, desperately trying to keep from slipping off the bridge. Although prepared for the pain, he still clutched at his stomach.

Immediately, the trustees began herding the prisoners into cells, and back up the stairs. Those who resisted were intestinated, and scores fell to the ground in agony as the whining drowned out all other noise.

He felt the bridge move under him – but outwards. It slowly extended towards the cells, while at the same time the intestination ceased. He looked around groggily, and saw a remnant of Maddox that had survived the particle beam blast of the spatter gun – his intestinator. He closed his fingers around it, slowly getting to his feet as the bridge, fully extended, made contact. Raising a clenched fist above his head he walked towards the cells.

Abraham and Nino waited for him.

"I owe you an apology," Abraham said.

"None's necessary," Brennick replied, slipping the intestinator into Nino's hand as two trustees approached, and seized him.

They led him away, back across the bridge and into the elevator.

Nino and Abraham turned and made their way back to their cell.

Once there, Nino lifted Stiggs' mattress, pulled it off the bed. Underneath, Stiggs' store was revealed. Nino reached down and tossed out onto the floor the merchandise that Stiggs had been dealing: cigarettes, matches, girlie magazines, clothes, drugs.

D-Day watched for a second, then joyfully jumped in to help, grabbing some of the loot for himself.

"Hey. Hey," called Stiggs, entering the cell, pushing them aside.

"This is Brennick's bed now," Nino said.

"Since when," Stiggs growled.

"Since your friend got hit with the Splatter Gun, dickhead."

Stiggs looked around, saw Abraham standing calmly, arms crossed on his chest. He licked his lips.

"Friend? Are you kiddin' me? I always hated that fucker Maddox. Brennick's my man, and he wants me to have this bed."

"Yeah, well, he gets back, he can tell us."

"Gonna stay empty a long time."

9

Brennick was taken to the Central Control, stripped naked, and strapped into a double ring of silvered metal, with electrodes clamped on to his head, and attached to his nose, mouth, penis and anus.

He stood passively. There was no way he could escape whatever was in store for him, but he was damned if he was going to give Poe the satisfaction of seeing him lose his dignity. He had learned to endure far worse in the army. He had also learned that the secret to inner peace and to survival was belief in himself. No matter what was inflicted on him, the deepest part of him knew that if he lived, he would survive.

Standing impassively in the bizarre contraption, he saw the door to the chamber open. Karen entered. Karen!

He tried to call out, but his mouth was stuffed with tubing.

She rushed up to him, followed by two trustees, and touched his face. Involuntarily he winced, and she withdrew her hand.

A trustee disengaged the tubing from his mouth, and Karen said, ironically:

"You look awful."

"That bad?" Brennick said, his tongue dry.

"Worse."

"I was clumsy. Ran into a brick wall."

"Only, the wall was moving." She smiled tenderly. He smiled back, gazing into her eyes. She looked unhurt. Thank god.

"Poe says you're a hero. A leader of men. What does he know?"

"Nothing."

"Damn right. He says I should tell you to cooperate."

"You just told me."

"That's right, I did. He says I should tell you it's going to very bad if you don't."

"No kidding." He grinned at her.

"He says if I care about you at all, I would beg you to listen."

"What do you say?"

"I want my husband." She spoke softly, and he felt her breath on his face.

"You got him," he said.

"John." Karen paused. "No matter what you decide ... I'd never not love you." Roughly, the trustees pulled Karen back by her upper arms.

"You're really lousy at good-byes, you know that?" he called out to her, as she was hustled out of the chamber.

"Always have been," she called back, as the door shut.

Karen was taken into Poe's control room.

"We're going to mind-wipe him," he said, watching her closely.

"You'll never destroy him." She glared at Poe.

"Destroy him? We're going to make him more useful. Zed-10 – please commence mind-wipe."

The largest monitor in front of them lit up, revealing Brennick in the mind wipe chamber. One of the silver circles began to rotate, so that the body strapped to it was slowly spun. Then the other rotated him at 90° to the other.

"Take this prisoner back to her cell," Poe said, without taking his eyes from the screen.

The monitor displayed greyness, then went black. The sound of Brennick's blood being pumped through his body throbbed from the speaker.

A square zoomed from nowhere into the centre of the screen. It was replaced by a triangle, then by a rectangle. The screen blacked out again. Karen appeared, in nurse's uniform. She began to unbutton her blouse, talking over her shoulder. Blackout.

The screen became bright white, then revealed Brennick and Karen chasing each other. Karen disappeared into the whiteness, then re-emerged wearing a wedding gown and holding a large bunch of red roses. She threw them at him. They reached for each other and fell into each other's arms, laughing.

Blackout.

The throbbing of the heart beat maintained its pulse. On the screen, squares lined up, and appeared to march off to the side.

Blackout.

A baby gurgled happily in a cradle. The baby's smile froze and it started crying.

Brennick reached into the cradle, looked down and saw the cradle was full of snakes.

Blackout.

Triangles formed, began jumping on the screen.

Blackout.

The image of Karen racing across the border bridge appeared on the screen. A net fell out of the sky, catching her.

Blackout.

Brennick, in the construction area, shoved Stiggs aside, and pushed Maddox to one side to reveal Karen with her jumpsuit pulled down, her legs spread apart, staring up at him in shock. Brennick stood frozen.

Blackout.

A man faced away from the screen. He turned to reveal Poe holding a jar. In the jar was a foetus. The foetus opened its eyes. Brennick put his hands over his eyes, his fingers digging into his sockets. Blood trickled out of the sides of his eyes, flowing faster becoming torrents.

Blackout.

10

Karen was brought back to Poe's office, and the first thing she saw was her husband's face displayed on the central monitor. It was pale, and the eyes were rolled back displaying only their whites.

A Mozart wind quintet played in the office, and Karen watched helplessly the face of her tortured husband.

"He has been in there for three days. No one has ever lasted four," Poe said.

"There's a first time for everything," Karen said bitterly.

"It is in your power to stop his pain. Are you willing to do that?"

"But – there's a price."

Poe simply said:

"I want you to live here. To share my quarters for the remainder of your stay."

Karen thought about that.

"Why me?"

"Why does this music give me pleasure?"

"I dunno. I skipped music appreciation."

"I am looking for a friend, a companion." For the first time, Poe looked at her.

"I'm not real friendly to anyone who tortures him. Stop it."

"But my dear, I have just told you, his fate is entirely up to you."

Karen looked at her husband's image on the monitor, saw the poor anguished face, the sightless eyes. She knew what decision she had to make.

"Yes," she said finally, softly. "Yes."

"What was that, my dear?"

"I hate your guts. But – yes. Just let him go."

Poe pressed a button on his console.

"Release prisoner Brennick from mind wipe. Return him to his cell."

The screens went blank.

"H-how do I know you're not lying?"

"I never lie," Poe said tonelessly. "I cannot lie."

Brennick was returned to his cell by a trustee. Nino stared as the trustee pushed the all but comatose Brennick into the cell. He stood where the trustee left him, his eyes blank, his body motionless.

"Mother of God, what have they done to him?" Nino whispered.

"He's a ghost, man," D-Day said. "He's gone."

"Bullshit. He's breathing," Nino said.

"The mind is dead," Abraham said. "The body just don't know it yet."

Gently, he led Brennick to his bed. Brennick just stood there, next to the bunk.

Abraham turned him around, pushed him behind the knees, and helped him into a sitting position on the bunk.

Stiggs watched with sour amusement.

"Big man ain't nothing but a water boy now," he said.

Abraham glared at Stiggs.

"I'm only saying ..."

With a shake of his head, Abraham lifted Brennick's feet off the ground, onto the bed, and pushed his chest down, pulling a blanket over him.

11

Karen was moved into Poe's quarters that day. She inspected the apartment. As well as the spacious central control room, with its couches, drapes, carpets and electronic monitoring adjunct, there was a large bedroom with a king size bed and adjoining bathroom, a dining room and a study come exercise room.

"These wardrobes are yours," Poe said, indicating cupboards in the bedroom. "I would be pleased if you would wear this tonight."

He opened the wardrobe door, and took out a white wedding gown.

"Where did you get this," Karen asked, taken aback.

"Zed-10 is most competent. Please try it on." He handed the dress to her.

Karen took it from him. Poe waited.

"Don't you have something else for me to wear?"

"I like that dress. I believe it was one of your favorites. Put it on."

Karen waited for Poe to leave, but he just stood there, looking at her.

"Aren't you going to leave while I change?" she finally asked.

It was obvious the idea had not occurred to him.

"Very well, if it makes you more comfortable."

He turned and left the room.

Karen clutched the dress to herself. Oh god, what disgusting things would Poe make her do? She thought of John. He was off that damned mind wipe machine. How more could she help him?

The only way was to gain Poe's confidence, and use his power to get them both out. What had he said? I want a friend, a companion. Well, she would become his friend. And friendship, Commander Poe would find out, was two way. He would become her friend. And then they would see.

She took off her prison smock, and walked into the bathroom. It was gleaming clean, white tiles everywhere, a full length mirror on one wall. She looked at her body briefly, surveying it matter-of-factly. There was the first hint that her belly was swelling, if you looked carefully. There were her boobs, starting to get a little heavier, the nipples a little darker. Then she saw the cupboard, and quickly opened it. There was shampoo and conditioner. Soap. No deodorant. Toothpaste in a plastic dispenser. Two toothbrushes, one unused, dark blue, the other, obviously his, dark green. She shuddered, careful not to touch it.

She took out the shampoo, conditioner and soap, and stepped into the shower. Her first proper wash since ... ? Better not think about that.

The warm running water refreshed her, and she knew that John would want her to look after herself. She had to gain Poe's trust. She patted her belly. And she only had a short time.

She felt guilty enjoying the luxury of thick white towels, but reminded herself she now had to work on Poe's terms.

Dry, a towel wrapped round her hair, she stepped into the bedroom. The wedding dress was on the bed, where she'd left it, but her prison smock was gone. She searched the wardrobe for underwear. There was none. Obviously that's something I'll still share with the other prisoners, she thought. All the women had been given smocks only, with no underwear. A couple of women had tried to fashion a sort of bra by tying two socks together, but it had not worked.

She looked at the gown on the bed, and again memories of their wedding day swam to the surface of her mind. She bit her tongue, to hold the feelings in check, then quickly reached down, grabbed the dress and slipped it over her head.

"You look ravishing."

Karen whirled in anger at Poe's words, then attempted a smile. How long had he been there?

"Come."

He took her arm and led her to the dining area. Abraham was there, next to a table set for two with silver cutlery on a starched white linen tablecloth.

"You may pour the wine now," Poe said, and Abraham set down a single cut crystal wine glass, half filled it with red wine, and set the bottle down on the table.

"It's St Hubert's – I believe it's one of the finest wines in the world. I thought we should celebrate." Then, to Abraham, "Thank you. You may go."

Abraham bowed slightly, and left.

Karen noted the single glass. "What about you?"

"I do not drink."

She looked at the bottle, picked up the glass and sniffed the wine suspiciously.

"What does it smell like?" Poe asked.

"Wine."

"A full bouquet? Is it reminiscent of summers in Provence. Or perchance something more personal."

Suddenly, as if an internal tap had been turned on, tears filled Karen's eyes. Anger and hurt welled up inside her. She no longer could play his game.

"This isn't just any wedding dress," she said, trying to keep her voice even. "This is my wedding dress. This isn't just any wine. This is our"

"All your property was confiscated," Poe said. "To pay for the cost of your incarceration. I wanted things to be familiar. I want you comfortable."

Poe reached behind her and unhooked the dress. It fell to the floor. Karen froze. Well, this was it. She didn't know what she would do. She felt like screaming. She clutched her hands tight, so tight her nails dug painfully into her palms.

Poe must have regarded her back for a long time. She could not move, but stared stupidly ahead, her mind senselessly repeating phrases over and over again. She felt him move closer, felt his breath on the back of her neck. Her body broke out in a cold sweat. Get on with it, whatever you want to do, she screamed silently within herself. He kissed the back of her neck.

"Director Poe," Zed-10 interrupted. "You are required in Central Control."

Poe raised his head. "Not now, Zed."

"Director Poe," Zed-10 repeated. "You are required in Central Control immediately."

Abruptly, Poe stepped back and moved away to the control console. Karen stood shivering in the warm air.

"The presence of the woman is causing you to act in a non-professional manner," Zed-10's soft female voice said.

"She is none of your business," Poe said.

"Her presence is a direct violation ..."

"I make my own decisions, Zed."

"I am here to protect you. Your obsession with this woman is not in the best interests ..."

Poe flicked an override switch, and Zed-10's voice cut out. He then left the control console, and went back to the dining room. Karen was seated at the table, her dress pulled back on. She had drunk the glass of wine.

"Now my dear. Where were we?"

Karen looked up. Poe's eyes had an excitement in them she hadn't seen before.

"Would you mind taking your dress off? Or would you like me to help?"

Karen shrugged, stood up mechanically. Her dress slid to the ground.

Poe advanced and stood in front of her.

"Amazing. Remarkable," he said. Under his scrutiny she felt as if every part of her being was invaded. He did not touch her but stood gazing at her breasts, her belly and crotch, her face. He walked around her.

"You really are most amazingly beautiful. You please me."

"Hurry up, then," Karen's voice almost broke, in her bitterness. She felt like hands were clasp and squeezing her heart, stopping her breathing. "Get on with it." She forced herself to smile at Poe. It was more a grimace.

"But my dear. Don't you understand? You are to be my friend. It pleases me just to look at you. Do you mind?" He reached out and touched her breast. The touch was gentle, his hand dry, almost papery. He lightly touched her flat stomach, her buttocks, then stood back.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" Karen felt herself almost choking on the words.

"What ever you like, my dear."

She jerkily picked up her dress and walked to the bedroom. She felt like an automaton, unable to move her limbs smoothly. Her heart racing, feeling herself perspire, she hung the dress up carefully, trying to relax.

She moved to the bed, and slumped down on it.

Poe followed her, stood for a moment at the foot of the bed, then slipped out of his robes and sat besides her, facing her.

She saw with relief that he was limp, and with disgust that his body was athletic and trim, not run to fat as she had imagined.

"I'm afraid I am not up to it at the moment," she said.

She felt her whole body was drained of energy. He seemed to recede from her, as if he were down the wrong end of a telescope. Never had she felt more trapped. John, what should I do?

"Never mind. There's plenty of time." She was surprised at Poe's acquiescence. He spoke calmly, and put his hand on her shoulder. She flinched despite herself.

Before he changed his mind she got up, pulled back the sheets and climbed into the bed. She felt like vomiting, screaming, going berserk. She lay there rigid.

Poe got in on the other side, and switched off the bed lamp. The only light came from the perpetual background illumination, that even Poe was not able to eliminate.

12

In cellblock F Orange, in the dim night lighting, Stiggs stood over the silent form of Brennick, prone on his bed. He clapped his hand in front of Brennick's face. His eyes did not blink. There was no sign he was aware of anything.

Stiggs glanced around, then took a match and struck, holding the lighted match in front of Brennick's eyes. Again there was no sign, not even a flicker in the eyes. He lit another, and held it under Brennick's hand. The hand remained limp and motionless. The smell of scorched flesh filled the cell.

Nino smelled the strange odour, looked up and saw what Stiggs was doing. He angrily jumped up and knocked Stiggs over.

"Don't touch him, asshole."

"What the fuck does he care?" Stiggs complained. "He did it to his own fucking self."

"No," said D-Day. "They did it."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

D-Day shrugged, uncertain.

"Yeah," said Stiggs sarcastically. "Right."

Later that day, at the construction site, Nino adjusted the taps on the back of Brennick's water tank.

"Can you hear me, man?" He turned to face Brennick. "I know you're in there. If you can hear me, blink your eyes, okay?"

Brennick stared straight ahead.

The next morning Karen awoke. So I must have slept, she told herself. Poe had gone. She went to the wardrobe and found a robe, which she put on, then went in search of him. He wasn't in the bathroom nor the study nor the living room. She found him at the computer in Central Control. Silently, she watched him at work from the doorway.

In front of him was the array of monitors, and Poe had brought up on to the largest screen the image of a girl, staring straight ahead. A prisoner's dream.

Hands reached around the girl from behind and unbuttoned her blouse. They pulled the blouse from her shoulders and unhooked her bra behind her, releasing her breasts.

Karen watched Poe study the image. The breasts were not large, and curved upwards. The hands came around her sides and held each breast, the girl the whole while staring straight ahead, a half smile on her lips. She had dark, shining eyes that burned with intensity, focusing inwards. The man behind her nuzzled her neck, then kissed her cheek.

The girl turned her face and hungrily kissed him back. Their mouths worked at each other. She pushed back with her body, while he held her breasts.

"Shall I intestinate?" Zed-10 asked.

"Just a moment longer, Zed." Poe stared at the image. "This is a fascinating dream. Quite instructive regarding the prisoner's psychology."

The man moved behind the girl, his hands now on her shoulders. She half bent over, shaking her head so that her long brown hair whipped around her shoulders. She eased her skirt down, reached behind her and clasped him, guiding the penis into her, laughing.

They moved slowly together, his eyes closed, her face alternatively concentrated and dreamy.

"Shall I intestinate?"

Poe paused a moment, then took his gaze from the monitor, pressing a button. He leant forward, entering the prisoner's dream.

"This is an unauthorized thought process," Poe said mechanically. He turned, and caught sight of Karen in the doorway. Immediately he got up, and came towards her. Karen locked eyes with him, and stood back to let him pass. "It's a very advanced model, isn't it?" she said, indicating the keyboard.

"Ah, yes." Poe was nonplussed. He recovered himself. "You were a computer technician in the army."

"I adore them. But I never got near anything as powerful as Zed." She glanced admiringly over his shoulder.

"Of course not. No one has."

Karen reached towards the keyboard.

"Don't touch her," Poe said peremptorily, slapping her hand away. His face suffused with crimson, and his voice took on an agitated quality.

"If I ever see you put so much as a finger on her keyboard, or utter a single voice command, you and your baby will feel a pain unknown in human history."

He paused a moment, perhaps realizing he had over-reacted, then said in a voice full of sweetness:

"Shall I have Abraham prepare you a salad? Or would you prefer some fruit."

He took her hand and led her out of Central Control to his office area, where the table was prepared with food.

They ate breakfast together. Or, rather, Karen ate. Poe must have eaten earlier.

"You seem fascinated by ... sex," Karen faltered, after she had eaten some toast and sipped a cup of coffee.

Poe looked at her, thought for a time, then replied.

"Yes," he said. "That is the word. Fascinated."

He reflected for a moment, then looked up briefly at her.

"Why do the shapes of a breast or a behind mean so much? Why does looking at you give me pleasure? It is just shapes, curves, patterns. Light reflecting and entering my eyes. Yet it fascinates me. It is the same with Mozart. His music is just variations of air pressure, vibrations in the air that vibrate my eardrums. Why do vibrations in the air give me such pleasure? Why do different vibrations mean nothing, or, worse, sound ghastly, even painful?"

He looked up from the table into her face. He paused, as if trying to find the right words.

"I watch the prisoners' dreams. Time and time again. They fascinate me. It's amazing how often sex is part of it. And so often the same. Breasts feature most of the time. The act of undressing seems very important.

"And I wonder at the link between sex and love. Love is the thing I am most interested in. Why is it so linked up with sex in these dreams?"

Karen felt unable to say anything. She took another sip of her coffee. He spoke so abstractedly. Coldly, calmly. And yet there was some kind of passion there, buried deep within. She would have to be very careful. She must use that passion to protect her and help John.

"And take you, my dear. I know it must be hard for you. But remember, you are helping your husband, and bringing your combined safety that little bit closer.

"With you, I look at the planes of your cheeks, at the light in your eyes, and wonder. Why do you make me feel as you do?"

"I am curious as to what goes through your mind when you have sex, what it would be like to make love with you. It is strange, is it not, my dear, how we say 'make love' when we

mean –" Poe paused, then spat out – "fuck."

There was a bitterness and loneliness in Poe she had not noticed before.

He smiled, as if to put a mask back on.

"I fear you will never love me enough to want to 'make love' to me."

"What would you like me to do," Karen asked. She felt out of her depth, unsure what tack to take. She put down her coffee cup and looked him in the eye.

"Would you like to, uh, kiss me, or, uh, me to kiss you ...?"

He made no response.

"Do you want me to suck you?" She pointed towards his crotch. Poe banged his hand on the table. She thought he was about to shout at her, but with an effort he controlled himself. He spoke, clipping his words.

"I want you to love me. I don't want you to do things to me."

She reached out to take his hand, but Poe dropped it to his side.

"I want you to be yourself, and get to know me. I want to look at you." He got up and returned to the Control room.

13

After a time, Karen took a shower. She thought hard, as the water sluiced off her body. What to do? John was down there, somewhere, mind wiped. At the mercy of fellow prisoners. He wouldn't last. She had to get to him.

And Poe. What did he do all day? Watch the monitors. Get off on some poor bastard's dreams. And torture them. The same routine, every day. Without change. An idea occurred to her. He was as much a prisoner of Men-Tel as she was. The difference was, he accepted it, rejoiced in it.

Why was he interested in her? Perhaps he really was lonely. He hadn't touched her – yet. For someone who was meant to be lonely, he didn't give a great deal. Then again, if he did he wouldn't be lonely.

There was a puzzle here. She pondered Poe's emotional coldness, his obsessive behaviour, and then thought about his preoccupation with watching dreams. Perhaps something was trying to break out.

Well, he wanted her to be his friend, his companion. She would help him find himself. Perhaps that way she would find her husband.

She got out of the shower, towelled herself dry, went to the wardrobe and found this time a blue dress, hanging next to her wedding dress. She took it out. It was her size – 12. She put it on and it fit her perfectly.

What to do?

She had to get access to the computer.

Quietly she moved from the bedroom, walked to the living room, heading towards Poe's office, adjoining central control. She heard a faint hissing, coming from the study, but continued to Poe's office, and looked in. It was empty.

On the desk, however, was a flickering hologram. She walked up to it, inspecting the lights closely. A holographic map of the Fortress stood in front of her. She could see each of the 30 levels, make out the central core, even see the channels for the service pipes.

The hissing grew a little louder. Strange, she thought. She hadn't heard that before. What was making the hissing sound? She turned away from the hologram. It was definitely coming from the study. She opened the door, glanced in.

Poe was connected to some sort of machine. He was naked, and tubes went from the machine to different parts of his body. One went directly to his stomach, and was attached to a catheter there. Another entered at his left nipple. Yet others connected to his side, and several to his head, through his nose and ears.

His eyes were glazed, staring at the ceiling.

Involuntarily, Karen gasped, her hand to her mouth.

At the sound Poe turned towards her, his eyes focusing on her. Methodically he pulled the tubes from his body, pressed buttons on the machine, which ceased the gentle hissing. He grabbed a robe and put it on.

"What are you?" she asked, horrified.

"I am enhanced," Poe said. He looked calmly at her.

"You're not human. You're ..."

"A monster? A freak?" Poe sneered. "Men-Tel has transformed me into a more efficient human being. Once a month I absorb amino acids, wasting neither food nor fuel.

"Most people spend a third of their lives unconscious. Asleep and totally unproductive. When my kind are in the majority, there will be no world hunger. No overpopulation."

"You don't sleep. You don't eat." She suddenly understood. "You can't make love, can you?"

"But I can love."

She looked at him with horrified fascination. "Are there others like you?"

"Oh, yes. Not many as advanced. But yes." He nodded. "I was one of Men-Tel's first babies. It was very special."

"Oh, my God." A new realization dawned on Karen. "You're what they do with our babies."

"Of course," Poe said, smiling.

Karen thought about the life growing inside her. She would never let them do that to her baby. Never.

She decided then, calmly, that she would do anything necessary to gain her freedom, to give her baby the chance to grow up outside the Fortress.

14

That night, as Karen slept, she dreamed. She was alone in the bed. Poe sat in the womb of central control and watched the dream on the large monitor.

She was a little girl, in her apartment. In the living room there was a window, and she looked out it and saw a great green park. Beyond the park was a lake with choppy blue water, with a concrete path between the grass and the water, lining the lake shore.

She looked from high up at her window down at the park, and to one side there was a farm. Looking down she could see animals on the farm. There were pigs, very large and pink, with big eyes, and sheep, and cows, also large. Her mother told her to come away from the window.

The scene changed, and she was walking in the park with her mother, holding her hand tightly, on the close cropped stiff grass beside the fence holding in the animals. A cow mooed, and came closer, thrusting its nose at the fence.

Karen's mother said:

"You can pet the cows. See how friendly she is?"

But the little girl clung to her mother's hand, and shrunk back from the large black nostrils and chewing teeth that snorted warm air at her.

The mother reached through the fence and stroked the cow's nose, scratching it gently. The little girl cautiously reached out a hand and also touched the cow's nose. It was warm and soft.

Then she was the mother leading her son by the hand to the fence, and he refused to touch the cow. He screamed in terror, dragging back behind her. The cow mooed and spoke mockingly:

"This is an unauthorised thought process."

The cow's moo became a honking laugh that grew louder, then faded into silence.

The green grass felt softer, and smoother, and she sat down, looked up and saw John watching her on their green satin bed cover. He laughed and pulled her to him.

She was kissing him, smothering his face with kisses, and he was inside her. She felt all encompassing, warm and wet and enveloping, embracing him all over.

Poe turned away from the monitor. He pushed a button and switched the screen off.

Karen half awoke, still partly in the dream. She thought of John, and in her half sleep smiled.

She reached out for him, and found the bed empty. Sleepily she mumbled: "John?"

There was no reply, and suddenly she was awake, understanding where she was.

She thought about her husband. They had met in a bar in Bosnia, during the crisis. It was a time of one night safe sex, and morning safe separation. But something had communicated itself between them. They had clicked.

She had been independent, with no close friends. Fairly self-contained. Generally the people she mixed with did not excite her particularly. She felt no urge to get close to them, no urge for intimacy. Perhaps it was the shadow of death that hung over all of them. Perhaps she was numb, had built a protective barrier to stop herself getting hurt. Perhaps it was some other reason.

When on occasion she had felt the need for a man she had found one readily enough. But the encounters were generally disappointments, either the man too eager or she too eager, each an experience that tended to put her off repeating it. But just as a morning after pledge to stop drinking is inevitably forgotten once the hangover has disappeared, and a glass of champagne is sipped with no thought for another hung over morning – so inevitably she would forget the last disappointing experience and seek out another.

The difference with Brennick had been he hadn't wanted her. He had actually just enjoyed sitting with her, talking. That had been unusual, particularly among the military people she mixed with. Screwing was usually the way they all coped with the brutalities of the day. People went from person to person, from short and long relationships, burying themselves briefly in each other, but really burying themselves in sensation. Whether drinking or screwing, the mind was dulled, distracted, off the job.

Brennick was more contained than that, and she sensed his strength when he sat down beside her that first time, at Romero's bar.

The music from the disco pounded, and neither of them felt any great urge to speak or dance. They had been able immediately to relax in each other's company. And that had given her a great sense of comfort. She had felt able to be herself.

He had gone back to her place, but had fallen asleep on her couch.

She had been surprised to find him still there in the morning, and had made coffee, woken him up, kneeling beside him.

Waking, he had looked at her with terrified eyes for a short moment, then had switched on his enveloping smile. That's when it had happened, she remembered. That's when she'd fallen for him. The sight of that brief moment of terror.

She remembered how bold she'd been. She had put down their coffee cups, taken his hand and held it to her cheek, then kissed him. He'd been a bit unresponsive and she blushed to remember how she had reached down and taken his penis in her hand, something she could never recall having done before on her own initiative. It had felt small and warm in her hand, and she had inspected it briefly. Under her gaze and touch it had stirred and she had kissed it, satisfied as to his reaction. She had then made love to him. Well, after a little, he returned as good as she gave, but his initial hesitance still stayed with her.

After she'd slaked her thirst for him, she'd curled up against his side on her bed and slept again.

And he'd gone when she'd woken, and she'd thought, fuck it, I've blown it again.

Except he had turned up that evening, and when she'd opened the door he had taken her hand, led her to the bedroom and fucked her, without saying a word.

They'd married within months, arranged transfers and returned to the States. Not long after, Michael was born.

15

The days passed and Karen often lay in bed in the mornings, drowsily reflecting on her situation. Her material comfort in Poe's quarters was greater by far than her cell had been, and her range of activity was more flexible. But she was still trapped. Even the luxury of a shower whenever she felt like it, and the good food, only seemed to emphasise her predicament. Her privileges, far from seducing her, or making her complaisant, strengthened her resolve. Each benefit reminded her of what John was missing out on. She was grateful she had been raised to be comfortable with austerity.

She realized her best weapon with Poe was speech, and argument. She sensed how he was changing.

"You're not the cold, rational creature you make yourself out to be," she said one day. She stood behind him, in the doorway of Central Control, while he watched yet another

sexual dream of one of the prisoners on a monitor.

Poe turned from the screen, raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Shall I intestinate?" Zed-10 asked.

Poe waved an arm dismissively, pushed a button, and spoke the familiar phrase. Somewhere a prisoner's brief memories of pleasure turned to pain, as he was reminded that he was entertaining an unauthorized thought process.

Poe got up.

"What do you mean?" he asked her.

"Well, look at you. How many prisoners are there here in the Fortress – about 35,000?"

Poe nodded.

"And how many would be asleep at any one time – about a third, that is, say, 10,000?"

Again Poe nodded.

"So if the PSIS monitor all their dreams, how many dreams could get flashed up to your monitors? If one in ten is dreaming at any one time, then there must be around 1000 dreams for each shift. You must have at least the choice of 100 dreams an hour to get off on."

"Bravo," Poe said. "So?"

"You say you're rational, enhanced, the new man. So why the obsession with sex? Why do you disturb those poor people's dreams? I believe you actually get something from the dreams. You're not just watching them because you have to. That's why you have me living here with you. Shit, you want to touch me properly, but you're scared. You're terrified of what you might find out about yourself. So you watch these dreams instead. Watching keeps you safe, uninvolved. Dreams can't hurt you."

"It's my job," Poe said weakly. "I must make sure no-one has unauthorized thought processes."

"But doesn't Zed-10 constantly ask you whether she should intestinate? She must know when the prisoner dreams the wrong thing. She doesn't need you. You're watching for other reasons."

"Zed-10 can only take action on my instructions. She has no power to act. I am the director of this institution. Zed is one of my tools."

Poe walked up to Karen, took her hand and led her to the couch in his office. They sat down. He was silent for a time, thinking.

"You know, you have asked an interesting question," he said at length. "I do find myself feeling strangely when I watch those dreams. When I watch you. I want to feel what they feel, what you feel." He stopped.

"Do you watch my dreams, too?" Karen gasped.

"I watch all dreams," he said.

Karen sat back, shocked. She exhaled deeply. Well, so what, she thought, finally. I just hope he can't read my thoughts.

"Do you ever get ... aroused?" she ventured.

"Aroused? I—" he broke off, looking troubled. "I need you to help me understand myself. I have many new feelings. Before, the Fortress worked smoothly, I worked smoothly, the routine was set and I gained my pleasure from knowing everything was operating smoothly. My Fortress was functioning smoothly."

"Now, I am disturbed. I want you to help me."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know."

Poe's certainty and arrogance was gone. He slumped in the couch and for the first time he appeared vulnerable. Karen smiled at him, took his hand.

Poe withdrew it, suddenly.

"No. No," he said. "I must have been mistaken. What has got into me?"

He jumped up, went back into Central Control, and sat down at the keyboard. Karen sat where she was on the couch, her smile still playing over her lips. It was a start.

"I saw your wife, Cap," Abraham said. "I saw Karen."

Brennick made no sign that he had heard. "She's getting larger. You can tell she's pregnant now."

He looked into Brennick's eyes for any sign of acknowledgment. Nothing.

"She can feel the baby moving. Your baby." Abraham turned his back, put his shaving gear away. Behind him, unseen, a single tear formed at the corner of Brennick's right eye, and ran down his cheek.

Poe came over close to Karen. There was a jauntiness in his step, a smile on his face as he placed his hand on her stomach.

"It is kicking," he said. And he spoke less harshly, less coldly.

"Yes," Karen said. She thought how he had changed. It seemed genuine, his tenderness. She suddenly put her finger on it. He was relaxed.

"This is a mystery I never thought I would know."

Despite herself, she was irritated.

"There's so much you don't know."

"I have been very well educated."

In his vulnerable state, Poe spoke with pride about himself, yet was not boasting. "I can speak twenty-seven languages, fluently."

"When have you spoken them?" she asked sharply.

"Occasionally we get a prisoner ..."

"Do you ever leave this place?" she asked in exasperation.

"Why would I want to?"

"You see!" she felt she had won some important victory. "You don't know. You have facts. To know, you must feel."

"You don't know how it feels to stand in the open, the wind in your hair. What snow tastes like. The softness of rain. The taste of the ocean."

A thought occurred to her. "You don't know what your own wine tastes like, do you?"

She went to the sideboard, took out a wine bottle and two glasses, and set them on the table.

"You know I cannot..." Poe was torn.

"Have you ever tried?" she said in her softest, most sensual voice. She poured red wine into the glasses, took his hand, and handed him one of the glasses. She raised hers to her lips. Poe, one hand trembling in hers, raised his glass, and quickly drank.

He let the wine roll around in his mouth, savouring the taste. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the taste, then swallowed.

"This is very special," he said thoughtfully, looking at the colour of the wine. He drank some more.

"I wonder why I never did this before?"

"How do you feel," she asked.

"Very ... happy."

Karen felt dismay inside her, but kept smiling at him. Happy. That was the last thing she wanted him to feel. Drunk, yes. Miserable, yes. Stupid, yes. But happy?

Abruptly, Poe slumped on his feet, and slid down to the floor, his glass rolling away from his hand. He slowly folded his arms across his chest and curled up into a foetal position, making soft gurgling noises, and closed his eyes.

She looked down at him carefully, saw that he appeared to be asleep. Here was her chance.

Quickly she walked to Central Control. Poe made no move to follow her, but remained curled up on the floor.

She sat down in Poe's chair and pressed keys on the computer keyboard.

"Why aren't you in voice mode?" Zed-10 asked.

She flipped the override switch, and keyed rapidly.

"Proceed, Director Poe."

On level F Orange, a PSIS glided down a corridor, stopped outside Brennick's cell, and focused a sensory laser on his head.

The central monitor in front of Karen glowed white then darkened, and revealed a small boy, in a deep pit.

The boy looked up, out of the pit, and saw Karen reaching down to him. He reached up his hand to her.

Brennick, in his cell, raised his right hand.

"Johnny," Karen said. "Come to me, Johnny."

The little boy stretched his hand, closing the gap.

Behind her, in the other room, Poe stirred, mumbled a few indecipherable words, and slumped back to sleep.

Karen worked the computer feverishly.

"Come to me, Johnny," she said again.

In his cell, Brennick smiled, opened his mouth, laughed softly.

The boy on the monitor reached closer, their hands almost touching.

"You don't have to be afraid," she whispered.

Poe stirred again, opened his eyes dazedly.

"Karen?" he said, half slurring. "Karen?"

He stumbled to his feet.

On the monitor Karen's hand grabbed the boy's, and began to pull him out of the pit.

"John," she whispered urgently. She pulled and the boy slowly rose in the pit, growing in size and age as he did so. Now adult, he came out of the pit.

"I'm right here, John."

Brennick's eyes opened wide.

"Karen. Where are you?"

She heard Poe in the other room, moving about.

"Right here," she replied, keying the computer off and slipping out of Central Control.

Poe moved groggily to her. "I must be more moderate in the future."

17

In cellblock F Orange the lights came on for morning. Stiggs and Nino got out of their bunks. D-Day and Abraham remained lying down. Brennick sat unmoving on his bunk, his eyes staring straight ahead.

"Good morning Cellblock Orange, Level F," said Zed-10. "Thirty minutes before reporting to work."

D-Day yawned and stretched.

"Someone get Brennick up," Stiggs said.

"I'm awake," Brennick spoke.

Abraham sat up, his mouth wide open. Stiggs dropped the shirt he was about to put on, and Nino, standing next to Brennick, stared in amazement at him.

"Holy fuck," he said. "You're alive."

Brennick clapped his hand to Nino's mouth, quieting him. He turned to Abraham.

"How long have I been out?"

"Four months."

Brennick shook his head. Four months. He looked around the cell, taking in his surroundings.

"It's true, man," said D-Day, getting out of his bunk. "You've been long gone."

Brennick slowly got to his feet, rubbing the side of his head.

"I'm okay," he said, to himself in surprise. Then, to the others:

"I'm okay!"

Abraham got out of his bunk, walked up close to Brennick, touched his shoulder.

"You're just the only ghost to make it back," he said.

"I had help." Brennick thought of Karen, and , her helping hand. "I been here that long, Karen's getting near term."

"Don't you worry about that. She's all right."

"Did you see her?" Brennick asked, disbelievingly.

"Are you strong enough for the truth, Brennick?" Abraham asked, his eyes showing his anxiety.

Brennick folded his arms, his eyes fixed on Abraham's.

"Karen moved in to Poe's quarters."

Brennick stiffened.

"That's why he didn't kill you."

"No!" With an effort Brennick restrained his impulse to smash his fists into Abraham, the walls, the bunks, anything. The others moved back a little from him. Gradually his anger receded, to be replaced with a forced smile that was worse than a punch in the face.

"That's good," he said. He spoke harshly. "That's very good."

"She saved herself," Abraham added, as if by way of explanation.

"She's closer to the way out." Brennick was still mad.

"You'll never get in there."

"You do."

"That's my job. I thought I made it clear to you. I've got a parole to worry about. I ain't gonna jeopardise that so you can play some Great Escape bullshit."

"I'm not playing."

"Yes you are." There was sadness in Abraham's voice. "You just don't know it."

Brennick ignored him. "All right. First things first. We keep this within the cell."

He looked pointedly at Stiggs. "That goes for you, too."

"Hey," Stiggs said indignantly. "I don't fuck with superman."

"Nothing special about me," Brennick said, and turned to Nino, who was sitting on his bunk.

"Did I give you something? Right before they took me. I tried"

"Yeah," the kid said. "I kept it, too. Just in case."

He went to his store at the foot of his bunk, and took out Maddox' intestinator. He handed it to Brennick.

"I don't know how," Brennick said, and his smile lost its anger and became hopeful. "But this is gonna get Karen out."

"Ain't you learned fucking nothing?" Stiggs interjected angrily.

Brennick looked at him dismissively. "What I learned, you'll never understand."

"Let me see it, Captain," D-Day spoke, reaching out for the device. "I know about these things."

They all turned to him.

"Let me see it."

Brennick considered, looking at the shiny metal surface of the intestinator, fitting snugly in the palm of his hand. D-Day's hand was still outstretched.

"I got to take it apart, okay?" D-Day looked up with excitement.

"Can you put it back together?"

"Machines love me, man. Anything at all. I can take it apart, make it tick again. It's what I did in the world, man."

"You were a mechanic?" asked Nino.

"Nah. Explosives," D-Day said. He held the sibilant sound of the word, breathing out the s, his face lighting up.

"First Intercontinental Bank Building. The safe blew like it was fucking butter. Only problem was, my partners didn't appreciate my work. They turned my ass in."

"Why?" Nino asked.

"Well, shit, man," D-Day said derisively. "I blew up the money." He started giggling, and punched Nino on the arm.

Brennick handed him the intestinator. "Don't fuck it up," was all he said.

Later that day, Abraham entered Poe's quarters. He saw that Poe was deeply involved in Central Control, and approached Karen, signalling with a finger to his lips to keep it quiet. He clipped the stems of some white camellias, and put them into a vase next to Karen on the table, where she sat eating.

"We need to talk," he said.

"Talk's dangerous," she whispered back.

"That's right. It is – I've talked with your husband."

Karen stared back at him. That was not possible.

"I'm John's cellmate," he explained.

Karen was flabbergasted.

"All this time –"

She grew angry. "You could have told me how he was, what he looked like," she hissed. "You could have –"

"All this time," Abraham interrupted her, "he's been like a zombie. Staring into space like nothing was there. Until today."

"It worked? Thank God," she breathed, elated. "It worked."

"I don't know what you did, but now he's planning an escape."

Karen's eyes lit up. Abraham shook his head.

"He's a good man. Nobody's ever gotten out of here. I don't want to see him die."

"He won't die. Not if I help him."

"You got it better than any woman in this place." Abraham couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Now why would you go and mess with that?"

"He stood up, ready to die for me," she said scornfully. "You think I wouldn't do the same for him?"

"What good is it, you both die together?"

"Better than living apart."

She gripped Abraham's hands in her own. "Help us."

After eating breakfast, the men were sent to the construction site, Brennick with his water carrying equipment, pretending he was still a ghost. Nino casually sidled up to him, taking a drink of water.

"I'm going with you."

"Sorry," Brennick muttered out of the side of his mouth, "I can't take the chance."

"You can't go alone, Cap."

"I'm not going alone."

"You ever see a pregnant bitch run?"

Without thinking, Brennick raised his head and said angrily, "She's not a bitch. She's my wife. Shit," he caught himself, fearing he'd given himself away, and slumped back into the ghost posture.

"Look man, the little sisters ain't walking. We can talk." He indicated the end of the PSIS tracks.

"There's nothing to say,," Brennick said.

"Listen, man. The night before I went in, the chollos got me a bitch – so I'd have a taste before I disappeared. You're my only chance, to find out what the real thing's like."

Nino's innocence reached Brennick more effectively than any emotional argument could have. It made him angry.

"I can't take you."

"If you leave me here, in two years I'll be feeding worms."

"I don't want to be responsible for anyone but myself."

Even as he said it, Brennick knew it was a lie. But a lie he couldn't unravel, couldn't find the knot at the heart of it to untangle it.

"It's me that'll be taking the chance." Nino said.

He was right.

18

Karen had worked out a plan. At the heart of it was the hologram map of the Fortress – it was the key to their escape. She decided she had to steal the crystal that generated the hologram, and persuade Abraham to smuggle it to John.

The problem was to find the right moment, when Poe's attention was fully occupied. Although he had grown to trust her more and more, there was no way he would allow her access to Zed-10, let alone to the crystal. And the days were running out, with the time of her confinement rapidly approaching. She had to act now.

Her opportunity came at night. She got out of bed to find Poe engrossed in discussion

with the computer, at Central Control.

"The new pods will be completed next month," Poe said, sounding defensive. It wasn't his fault that the number of prisoners entering the Fortress was growing steadily month by month, and exceeding the number who left, whether by completion of their sentence or, more frequently these days, by intestination.

"We are still behind the schedule," Zed-10 said.

"There have been some problems with the bedrock," he said, as if Zed were a child.

"Five new levels must be ready by the end of the year."

"Yes. Yes. Yes. I am aware of that."

Karen quietly sidled up to the hologram and, holding her breath, with the greatest care switched it off. She quickly pulled her hand back from the switch, and waited for whatever reaction came. There was none.

She heard Poe giving an instruction.

"Reset your clock, Zed. All work hours are now 93 minutes."

And Zed's response. "Confirmed."

She palmed the crystal, and slowly backed out of the room, towards the apartment. Poe at that moment turned in his chair and caught sight of her in the doorway.

"What are you doing awake?" he asked, surprised.

Karen paused, looked over her shoulder.

"I couldn't sleep." She yawned, and raised her right hand to cover her mouth.

Poe walked up to her suspiciously, and turned her around, opened her hands. They were empty.

"For the sake of our baby, you must get your rest."

Karen smiled at him, kissed him on the cheek, then turned and walked back to the bedroom. As soon as she was out of his sight, she took the crystal from her mouth, and placed it under the pillow of her bed.

In the morning she waited for Abraham. She toyed with her breakfast, merely nibbling on some toast. Sipped at her cup of tea. The minutes dragged on.

Finally he arrived at the apartment, and Poe came in from Central Control and sat in the chair for his morning shave. Karen waited until he had lathered Poe's face, then gestured to him. Abraham nodded, continued his barbering chores.

After Abraham had finished, Poe stood up, stretched himself, and went back to Central Control. Karen let out a deep breath, went up to Abraham. She held out her hand, revealing the crystal lens. He looked at it a moment.

"It's for the hologram map," she said. "All you have to do is take it to him."

She did not need to mention John's name.

"All? All? Fuck the dumb shit. That's a pretty big all."

"I know it's dangerous. I'm asking you anyway."

Abraham looked again at the crystal, lying in her hand like a large diamond.

"Say they don't mind-wipe me. What do you think happens to my parole?"

"Truth is, you're never getting parole and you know it," she said bluntly. "You hold on to the hope because you're a man. Because you keep something inside you none of them can touch. This is your chance to fight back."

"Who am I supposed to be fighting for? You? Your husband?"

"I've never begged before in my life." She reached out hand held his hand. "Please, Abraham, if you won't do this for me, do it for my baby."

19

D-Day had taken apart the intestinator that was all that was left of Maddox. He had fashioned a tiny screwdriver out of a piece of wire he had hidden in the seam of the cover of his bunk. The others sat at the front of the cell, blocking the view from any PSIS that might glide by.

Spread out in careful order on his blanket, the intestinator was in numerous pieces. D-Day had removed one lens from his spectacles, and had made a crude microscope by holding it front of the remaining lens. Through this instrument he examined the central core of the intestinator.

Time passed as he worked patiently. Every now and then Brennick bent over him to see

how he was progressing. D-Day acknowledged him with the barest of nods, as he concentrated on his task.

"This thing is amazing, Cap. She's beautiful. Sexy silicon body alone is a revolution-ary achievement."

"We already know that," Brennick said.

"No, man. I mean, this thing is a work of genius. Look at it. Look right here. This is a series of micro-charges." He pointed with his screwdriver. "That's your pain mode, all right. This thing right here's a macro. That kills you." He pointed to a tiny piece of metal. "Look at this itty-bitty thing right here on top. Now that's the nerve clip."

"I need you to put it back together," Brennick said impatiently.

"I'm working on it, man." D-Day was calm, so unlike his normal anxious state.

"And to get it out of me."

"Look, Captain. I may be able to set off a series of charges on this, cause you to throw it right up. The major drawback on that is, the bitch is highly sensitive. TNT on PMS."

"You mean, it might kill me."

"Definite possibility." D-Day looked up and grinned.

"Find another way." He felt exasperated.

"Maybe there is no other way."

"Wrong answer. Try again." He realised there was no point in losing his temper.

"If I get it—" D-Day began.

"When you get it." Brennick interrupted.

"When I get it ... I go with you."

Brennick shook his head, didn't trust himself to speak.

D-Day looked up at him.

"I'm having fun, Brennick," he said. "I'm enjoying myself. You know how long it's been since I had any fun?"

"Going out won't be fun."

"Yeah, but man – it'd be a trip."

That night, Abraham returned from Poe's apartment. He entered the cell, the laser bars flashed on again, and he walked up to Brennick. There was a cockiness in his manner that was different from the withdrawn sombre man they knew. He waited, saying nothing. Then, very slowly, he opened his hand, revealing the crystal lens.

"I gotta get this back before he finds out."

Nino stared. "What is it?"

"Some kind of map."

"Haven't any of you guys ever seen a holographic lens before?" D-Day said scornfully. "Only problem is," he said to Brennick, "we need a laser to make this thing work."

Brennick grinned. "We got a laser."

He indicated the bars to the cell.

"You gonna stick your hand in there?" Stiggs said sarcastically. "Now That's Entertainment."

Brennick ignored him. "We need something to hold it."

"No. Wait a minute. We got something." D-Day smiled. He held up his glasses, and popped out one of the lenses. He took the crystal and carefully inserted it into the frame.

"Does it fit?"

"Close enough."

D-day extended the frame and quickly positioned the crystal lens into the path of the lowest fed laser bar at the entrance to the cell. Immediately, a three dimensional image of the Fortress appeared. It was coloured, and about a meter high.

"I'll be goddamned," Stiggs exclaimed.

They looked at the replica. The thirty levels were revealed, all the PSIS tracks, the plumbing and cabling conduits, details of the central core and the lift mechanisms, all with miniature labels. Brennick smiled to himself. Karen had done it! He glanced at Abraham, aware of the enormous effort it must have taken for him to risk bringing such a prize. He put his finger into the hologram, into an area marked "Utility Corridor". The map zoomed in on the area, so that individual water pipes and electrical lines could be discerned.

Brennick looked at the others. "Look. This could be a way out."

He traced his finger up the map, each area momentarily zooming into close up. Finally he reached the top level, with the sign "Admitting Area" easily readable. The map suddenly went out of focus, and D-Day swore.

"Hold it steady," Brennick said sharply.

"Doing the best I can," D-Day muttered.

He cautiously readjusted the glasses, and the hologram sprang back to life, still enlarged at the Admitting Area.

"We go in through the construction area," Brennick continued. "Here."

He pointed.

"See. It feeds into this utility shaft that goes all the way up. They won't make it operational until the new floors are done."

D-Day moved the glasses slightly, and the rim intersected the laser bar. He yelped in pain as the frame glowed red hot, and dropped the glasses.

"You break that fucking lens, we are all dead," Abraham said in fright.

"Fuck the lens. I need my glasses."

"You are a useless fucker," Nino put in. "You know that?"

The glasses had fallen just outside the cell. Brennick dropped to the floor and looked through the laser bars at them. Carefully he eased his hand out under the lowest beam, as flat on the floor as he could make it. His fingers reached the glasses. He edged his hand closer, and a finger was able to nudge the wire frame. He moved his hand sideways, and the glasses moved closer. Keeping his hand flat he raised the forefinger and second finger, and gripped the frame. Gently he pulled the glasses towards the cell.

"Got you," he said, at the same time grazing the lowest laser bar with his shoulder.

Without dropping the glasses he quickly pulled his hand back. They all smelt the tang of singed flesh.

"Man, don't you hurt?" Stiggs said, shaken.

"Shit, yes," Brennick replied, wincing from the pain from the burn at his shoulder. He handed the glasses back to D-Day.

"How's the lens," Abraham asked anxiously.

"It's fine. The motherfucker's fine."

He put his glasses on, and laughed. "You should see what you fools look like through this thing."

"I owe you," Brennick said to Abraham. He reached out to shake his hand.

"One way you can pay. You can leave me the hell out of anything else you gonna do." Abraham snapped, unsuccessfully hiding a smile. He took Brennick's hand and shook.

Brennick patted him on the shoulder and said, "D-Day, give him back the lens."

20

Abraham entered Poe's apartment, and commenced dusting the furniture, moving towards the base of the hologram housing. Karen was seated behind Poe, who stood staring out the window down into the bowels of the Fortress.

"Tell me about your childhood," Poe said. Abraham looked up, realised Poe was talking to Karen.

"I've told you before. There was nothing special."

"Tell me again. Tell me about the park."

Abraham caught Karen's eye, and motioned for her to keep Poe occupied, indicating the hologram housing. She saw the lens in his hand and turned her attention to Poe, who still stood looking down on his prison.

"My parents lived in an apartment building. Only one window had a view. But from that window, I could see the great green park which lined the lake shore."

"And in the park there was a farm." Poe spoke quietly, reflectively, knowing the story by heart.

"Yes. You see, you know it as well as I do."

"With pigs."

"And sheep. And cows."

Abraham held the lens over the housing. Poe turned to face Karen, and immediately Abraham commenced dusting.

"You could pet the cows," he said dreamily.

"Only I was afraid. But my mother, who was a kind woman, would pet them for me. And one day, when she held me, I felt like the bravest girl in the world. I touched the cow's nose. It was so warm, and soft, I can feel it to this day."

Poe turned away from her again, looked out the window.

"I want you to divorce your husband."

"That's not part of our bargain."

Abraham quickly tried to push the lens into the housing. It would not go. Trying not to force it, he jiggled it around in panic.

"Your husband will never leave this place," Poe said. "You will never see him again. He has become a cog in the Fortress' grand design. Let me show you."

He stood up, just as the lens fell into place. Abraham quickly stepped back and started dusting again.

Poe walked past Karen to the hologram map and switched it on. With relief, Abraham saw the replica of the Fortress spring to life.

Poe turned to Karen.

"Your husband is but one of many whose only reason for being is the expansion of our facility. Here."

He touched the Work Area.

Nothing happened.

Poe touched it again, but still there was no magnification. He looked up to Karen, his mood changed to anger.

"Have you touched this?"

"No," Abraham interjected, before Karen could speak. "I noticed some dust on the lens. I thought it best to clean it."

"You fool. You smudged it. Do you know what it will cost to repair this map?" Poe's face went red.

"I beg your indulgence."

"This," Poe said icily, "will have a bearing on your parole."

Karen saw the effect the threat had on Abraham. He was a proud man, reduced to a fearful child.

"I am very, very sorry," he said.

"Be glad I do not place you in solitary."

Poe turned to Karen and spoke in more conciliatory tones.

"Divorce your husband, marry me, and I will request permission of the Men-Tel Corporation to raise the child as my own."

Karen opened her mouth, but said nothing. Poe reached over and gently touched her pregnant belly.

"I am telling you, I shall not enhance your child. Does that mean nothing?"

Karen thought for a moment, suppressing the distaste she felt at his hand on her person.

"And John?"

"I will set him free," Poe said, exhaling slowly. "I expect your decision tomorrow."

21

When Abraham returned, he sought out Brennick.

"Heard something you should know about." Brennick looked up. "Poe wants Karen to divorce you. She does, you'll get a pardon, he'll raise the baby in here."

"No way," Brennick said, thinking of Karen. There was no way you could trust Poe.

"You all get to live. That's a one hundred percent certainty. What chance you have, you go out?"

"That's a chance I'll have to take."

"I knew you'd say that. Well, you better take it soon. Because Karen's got to say yes or no to the man tomorrow night."

"Then we go tomorrow morning."

He turned to D-Day, busy with the intestinator. "We're out of time."

"I think I got it." He looked up, smiling broadly, and wiped a hand wearily across his brow. "Watch this."

D-Day stood up from his crouching position and placed the re-assembled intestinator on his stomach. He let go of it.

It hung there, as if glued to his belly.

"Look, no hands," he said, and began to dance around the cell like a hyperactive six-year old. He wiggled his hips grotesquely, stuck out his belly and pulled it in, and then laughed uncontrollably. The intestinator stayed put.

"Fucking thing's a magnetic detonator," he finally gasped.

"So?" Brennick was not amused.

D-Day composed himself.

"Didn't you go to grade school, man? You got yourself a couple of magnets, piece of paper, you move one –"

"You can pull it out of us." Brennick's voice was full of hope. Now they had a chance to succeed.

"Well, yes. In theory," D-Day said, sobering up. "I mean, I ain't tried it yet. I don't know. Maybe I just set it off – and give this cell a new coat of red paint."

"Let's find out."

"Right now?"

"You got a better time?"

D-Day plucked the intestinator off his stomach. He moved to place it on Brennick's, when Nino spoke.

"No, man. You turn into a burrito, what happens to the rest of us."

"Try me," Stiggs said.

They all turned and looked at him. He looked fiercely at Brennick.

"I'm going with you."

"No way," said Nino.

Brennick looked at him for a moment.

"In here, you're President Schwarzenegger. What would you be on the outside?"

Stiggs looked back without blinking.

"Free," was all he said.

He grabbed the intestinator from D-Day and stuck it on his stomach.

"You gonna do it, you gonna sit on your ass?"

D-Day looked at Brennick, who nodded. D-Day shrugged, and started to manipulate the intestinator. Stiggs' stomach suddenly bulged.

"Now this may hurt. I got to close the thing up, okay?"

He pressed a button on the intestinator and it closed up. Stiggs doubled over in pain. D-Day ignored this, and Stiggs straightened up, gasping.

As he slowly moved the intestinator up. The bulge followed.

"I think I got it," he said to himself.

"Don't just fucking sit there, you little asshole," Stiggs snarled, on the verge of panic. "Get it out of me."

"No hurry, no worry," D-Day said calmly. He carefully moved the intestinator up Stiggs' chest and, inside, the other intestinator was forced up the digestive tract. By steady manoeuvring he gradually brought the intestinator up to Stiggs throat, where he stopped.

Stiggs started to choke, going red in the face.

"Stop fooling around," Brennick said. "Get the damn thing out of him."

"I ain't fooling nothing. Thing's fucking stuck."

D-Day reached into Stiggs' mouth with his fingers, but this only caused Stiggs to make even more urgent gasping strangulated sounds.

Brennick shoved D-Day aside, moved behind Stiggs and wrapped his arms around him. With a grunt of exhaled breath, he sharply contracted his arms, squeezing Stiggs.

The intestinator came flying out of his mouth, and he dry retched as he gasped for breath.

The others stood back, and D-Day retrieved Stiggs' intestinator.

"Okay. My turn," Brennick said.

D-Day shrugged. His old anxiety was back. "Somebody take notes, man. I finish with the rest of you, I can't do this on myself."

"I'll do it to you after you do me," Abraham's voice came from the rear of the cell.

Brennick turned and looked at him.

"What about your parole?"

"Parole? Bullshit!" Abraham laughed bitterly. "Time I woke up. I'm going with you. You said it yourself. I'm in Poe's quarters. I can take Karen out to admissions, all you guys got to do is get there."

Brennick thought about what Abraham was offering.

"It's too much of a risk."

"You're afraid. Afraid you're going to lose us the way you lost that platoon."

Brennick started back, turned away from the men. They all stared at him. Slowly he met their gaze, one by one.

"How did you know about that?" he asked Abraham.

"I get to know a lot of what Poe's interested in."

Brennick thought back to that time, then spoke as if he were in a trance.

"We were an advance unit, supposed to recon a position before the rest of the unit moved in. They were ready for us. We walked straight into a mine field. My point guard – man who'd been with me for three years – ran right into Betty. She bounced straight off the ground, hit him waist high. Cut him in half. Shrapnel went everywhere. Only reason I'm alive is because he took most of the hit. Five of the men died on the spot. They were lucky." He paused, reflected.

"The rest of us were pinned down for three days. I never heard a shot, an explosion, nothing. All I heard was my men screaming."

He shook his head.

"My men were dying and there was nothing I could do. When the army finally came, I was the only one left alive."

He looked up at the others. His voice became bitter.

"They wanted to give me a promotion. I wouldn't take it. I don't ever want to be responsible for another man's life again."

"Hey man. I'm responsible for myself," Nino said. "Better to die trying than to die in here."

"Right on, man," D-Day said.

Stiggs nodded agreement. "Shit," he said.

He turned to Abraham, questioningly.

"I haven't dreamt in forty years," the once best trustee said.

22

The next morning, they ate breakfast. Brennick thought, oddly, this might be my last meal inside the Fortress.

Then they gathered and were sent down to the construction site. Once out of sight of the PSIS, D-Day carefully placed the five intestinators against the side of the empty heating duct, in a rough circle. The magnets of the intestinators clung to the metal of the duct. He signalled all clear, and then swiftly drew back.

Brennick grinned, nodded to Stiggs, and punched him on the jaw. Stiggs fell back as if Brennick had king hit him. Nino and D-Day joined in, causing confusion and making it difficult for the PSIS to work out what was happening.

Brennick picked up a shovel, and Stiggs, back on his feet, grabbed a pick. They circled each other, landing blows on each other's implement.

In his office, Poe dictated to Zed.

"John Brennick has been thoroughly rehabilitated and is hereby granted a full pardon. He is therefore free to leave the Fortress—"

"Before completing the document," Zed-10 interrupted, "there is something you must see in Central Control."

"Not now, Zed."

"I insist." Zed-10's feminine tones never changed, yet somehow Poe detected an added forcefulness in the computer voice. He stood up and walked into Central Control, and sat

down in front of the monitors.

"Well?"

"Please observe," Zed-10 said.

The central screen briefly showed static, then an image of Karen appeared, taking the crystal lens of the hologram map from its housing. He saw himself pat Karen's stomach, as she secreted the lens in her mouth. He saw her give it to Abraham.

"How dare you spy on my quarters?" Poe was outraged. At the same time he felt a pain inside himself, a pain he had never felt before. His eyes seemed affected. They were screwed up. He reached up to rub them, and they felt wet. Tears? He was crying.

"A report has been filed with the Men-Tel Board of Directors," Zed-10 continued. "You are being relieved of all responsibility. Your replacement will be here within 24 hours. Until then you are confined to quarters."

"Confined to quarters?" Poe gestured indicating the breadth of his apartment. "I have never left these quarters in my entire life."

"You are the property of the Men-Tel Corporation."

"I am the Director of this institution."

"You will please leave Central Control. Crime Does Not Pay."

Poe stood up and started to leave Central Control. At the door he turned to take one last look at his former domain. The door slammed in his face. Through it he heard Zed-10 speak again.

"Construction area fight. Prisoners Brennick, Stiggs, Maddox ..."

"Maddox? Impossible," Poe muttered. He realised suddenly what Brennick must be doing.

"Commence intestination," Zed-10 said.

"Zed. No. Maddox is dead," Poe shouted through the door.

Zed-10 ignored him, while the monitor displayed the image of Brennick and Stiggs fighting. There came the sound of an explosion and the camera swung wildly, out of focus.

"Zed. Listen to me." Poe tried to remain calm.

"You are no longer in command."

"Maddox is dead. You splattered him. There is no Maddox. How can he be fighting?"

There was no indication that Zed-10 had listened.

"You imbecilic machine. There is an escape in progress."

"Intestimators indicate death mode," Zed-10 said sweetly.

"We should all die like them," Poe shouted. "Garbage in, garbage out, Zed. You are receiving insufficient data. They are escaping. And you are responsible. Do you want to be responsible for the first escape from the Fortress? Zed? Are you listening, Zed? Do you know what they'll do to you? They will dismantle you. They will tear you apart circuit by circuit. You will be lucky if you end up a Speak & Spell."

The door into Central Control opened.

Poe rushed in, sat at the keyboard and watched the monitors. Punching a button, he said coldly:

"Mass intestination – pain mode."

On the screens all the prisoners at the construction site fell to the ground, writhing. Another PSIS camera regained control, and focused in on the hole in the heating duct.

"They are in the heating duct."

"Intestimators indicate –" Zed-10 began.

"Clear construction site," Poe interjected. "Cease intestination."

The main monitor in front of Poe now showed trustees herding prisoners back to their cells. Soon the area was deserted, leaving only the sight of the hole in the duct in the middle of the screen.

Abraham approached Karen inside the apartment.

"Come on. Time to get out of here," he said.

Karen reached over to press the door button, which opened – to reveal Poe standing there.

He shook his head sadly.

"Zed warned me that our relationship was not in the best interests of Men-Tel. I ignored her. Foolish me."

"Get out of our way," Abraham said.

When Poe made no move, he stepped determinedly towards him.

"Intestinate Abraham, please," Poe sighed, resignedly.

There came the familiar screech, but instead of dropping in agony, Abraham laughed, a deep, hearty full roar of pleasure. He reached into his pants and pulled out his intestinator, and threw it onto the floor. The screeching stopped.

"I said get out of our way." He said to Poe, and punched him in the solar plexus. It may as well have been solid steel. Abraham shook his fist in pain, while Poe raised his hands and grabbed him around the neck, starting to throttle him. Abraham fought back, trying to knock Poe's arms aside, but he was no match for the stronger man.

Karen wrapped her hand in the sleeve of her robe, smashed the glass framing the Hunt. She picked up a long shard, raised it high above the two grappling men, and brought it down with all her force into Poe's shoulder. Blue fluid spurted out, and Karen raised the shard again and again, stabbing down into Poe's back.

Poe released Abraham from his grasp, who slumped motionless to the floor, and turned towards Karen. She raised the shard again, trying to smash Poe in the face.

Calmly, Poe reached out and snatched the shard from her, crushing it in his hand into tiny pieces. He opened his hand and scattered them onto the carpet, and smiled at her sadly.

"I really would have raised the child as our own. Under the circumstances, your baby will be harvested and enhanced."

She reached out to hit him, but Poe was much faster. He grabbed her arm with one hand, twisting it behind her back. Karen screamed in pain.

"And you," Poe snarled. "You will have created our most important product and so your contribution to this world will be complete."

With his free hand he lashed her across the face, knocking her to the ground.

"There is a certain satisfaction in doing this myself, did you know that, dear?"

Karen tried to stand up, and crawled onto her knees.

"Is this what love is?" Poe asked himself.

He kicked her legs, knocking her over again.

23

There was a flash of heat and the five intestinators exploded, blasting a hole in the heating duct. Immediately Brennick, Stiggs, D-Day and Nino ran for the pipe. They scrambled in through the hole, Stiggs giving D-Day a lift and then climbing in himself. The sides of the pipe were still hot, but cooling, and there was acrid smoke everywhere. Inside the pipe the smoke cleared, and they saw darkness stretch out in each direction.

"Follow me," Brennick shouted, and ran to the left. The others followed and quickly they reached the first junction. A distant hissing came from down the pipe, growing louder. Looking down they saw steam billowing out from nozzles at the far end of the pipe.

"Aw, shit, man," Stiggs said. "I thought this was the way out of here."

"It is the way out." Brennick replied.

"Not through that," D-Day said.

They peered towards the steam, already feeling the pipe heating up. Stiggs ran forward, only to be hit by a jet of steam in the face, as another set of nozzles, barely 15 metres away suddenly spurted steam. He screamed, and fell down, then scrambled to his feet and ran back to them, clutching his face.

Above the hissing they heard the sound of the public address system, working even inside the heating duct.

"Attention, prisoners. Surrender immediately and you will not be harmed."

Brennick recognised Poe's voice.

"It's a trap," he said.

"This," said Stiggs, indicating the pipe, "is a trap."

"Prisoner Brennick. I have your wife. You have three seconds to surrender. The strike clones have been activated."

Stiggs began clambering back towards the hole in the pipe.

"Don't do it, man," Nino said.

"Fuck the rest of you," Stiggs called over his shoulder. "This is our only chance."

"You go, you're dead." Brennick saw his words would have no effect.

"I ain't gonna be boiled alive. They don't execute without a warrant."

Stiggs reached the hole and started to climb through.

"They made me do it," he shouted as he clambered through. "It was Brennick. He forced—"

There was the sound of machine gun fire. They all froze.

Then Stiggs' body fell slowly back into the pipe, his head and shoulders smashed by bullets beyond recognition.

"Shit," Nino said, helplessly.

Brennick realised he had to take the lead, or he would lose them all.

"Quick. This way," he said, with all the confidence and authority he could muster. He crouched down and crawled back up the pipe, past the hole and Stiggs' body. D-Day and Nino followed.

As they moved down the pipe a plume of flame suddenly shot into the pipe through the hole, followed by a machine gun, which pointed back down the pipe where they had been. It swivelled and fired. Then the gun retracted and another plume of fire shot into the pipe. The gun appeared again, and started to swivel in their direction.

Brennick cautioned the other two to keep down, and he raised his shovel, ready to attack. The gun lowered, revealing itself to be attached to a mechanical arm.

"What the fuck is that?" D-Day whispered.

At the same time, Brennick brought his shovel down with all his force on the barrel of the machine gun, which fired several rounds. The bullets ricocheted down the pipe.

The machine gun arm protruded further into the pipe, the arm following, revealing a shoulder and the mask of a strike clone. Brennick brought his shovel down again, hitting the mask full on. Desperately he hit it again and again, until the mask shattered, revealing a half human, half mechanical face. One eye was sewn shut, and a camera projected from the other eye socket. There was a tube where the mouth should have been, and a blue fluid oozed out of it.

Brennick raised his shovel and smashed it down, shattering the camera lens. The strike clone fired wildly, nearly hitting Nino, who dropped back down to the floor of the pipe. He fell into a shallow stream of hot water, and yelled in a mixture of surprise and pain.

Brennick continued whacking at the strike clone, which ceased firing, and emitted a high whine, a little like an infant crying. He brought the shovel down once again on the mechanical arm and severed it from the gun.

D-Day moved closer.

"This thing is fantastic, man. They've taken a person and wired him into the mainframe."

"The perfect soldier," Brennick said.

"Nerve-capable firing pins. The shit they're coming up with these days," he said in admiration.

Brennick picked up the machine gun, and found he could insert his hand into the firing mechanism.

"Thanks for the hand," he said to the dead clone.

Pointing the gun at the opening he fired several rounds through it. He looked quickly through the hole, then clambered out, D-Day and Nino set to follow.

Rapidly, Brennick fired and hit an approaching strike clone, which staggered back, whining. He fired on two more as they scrambled over the top of a mound of dirt on the construction site. His burst of bullets hit and destroyed one of them. The other retreated back over the mound.

Nino and D-Day clambered out of the heating duct and followed Brennick. Over his shoulder, Nino saw a strike clone appear and dived behind a dumpster, yelling for D-day to follow. The clone sprayed tear gas at them, and as they emerged coughing and spluttering, the strike clone lined them up in its sights.

There was a spurt of bullets, and Brennick hit the clone. It collapsed, whining, jerking its legs about.

"Split up," Brennick yelled.

Immediately, Nino raced out towards the mound. D-day paused by the dumpster to adjust his glasses, which had started to fall off his nose. The fallen strike clone reached out and grabbed his leg. D-Day seized a pick that had been left near the dumpster, brought it up and smashed it down into the strike clone's camera eye. The clone let go his leg and

tried to pull the pick out from its face.

Brennick raised his gun and shot the clone, destroying it. Behind him, another appeared, raised a flame thrower, and shot a plume of fire just as Brennick tucked and rolled behind a large boulder. The flames hit the rock, and immediately Brennick fired his gun back at the clone, destroying it.

D-Day rushed across the open space for cover. As he ran his glasses dislodged, and fell to the ground. He halted and reached down blindly to pick them up, and stepped on them with a crunch. They were smashed.

"Fuck. I can't see," he shouted.

He stood up, putting himself straight in the path of a splatter gun that had raised itself behind the mound, and a strike clone that appeared on the opposite side. Brennick launched himself horizontally and tackled D-Day, bringing him down a split second before the spatter gun fired. They rolled over, as the spatter gun hit the strike clone, disintegrating it in a mass of molten metal.

Brennick grabbed D-Day by the arm, and they both raced towards the central core. Nino dashed out to join them.

The spatter gun, meanwhile, moved towards him. Brennick stood up, making himself a target, too. The spatter gun, faced with the conflicting images of the prisoners, could not choose which one to fire upon.

Quickly Brennick moved towards the immobilised gun. He jumped up and climbed on top of it, pulling D-Day up behind him. The spatter gun bucked wildly, trying to dislodge them. Nino made a flying leap and clambered up as well.

"Get me out of here," D-Day yelled.

"We're taking the express," Brennick called, exhilarated.

The splatter gun began rising.

"Well, fuck me, cowboy," Nino yelled.

Down below a remaining strike clone fired at them. Brennick aimed down and fired back, destroying the last clone.

The spatter gun kept rising, at the same time trying to buck them off, twisting and turning unsuccessfully. Men at the edge of each of the levels saw the weird progression, and cheered wildly, banging and shouting as they ascended the prison.

24

In Central Control, Poe watched the battle on the monitors. Karen lay on the floor outside, in Poe's office.

Brennick, D-Day and Nino jumped on the splatter gun. As the splatter gun ascended they disappeared from the monitors.

"Where are they, Zed?"

"No visible recognition."

In disgust, Poe stood up, walked to the window and peered out.

"Must I do everything myself around here?" he said.

He walked out of Central Control to his office. Two trustees entered the apartment. They saw Karen on the floor and went straight to her. They grasped her arms, and lifted her up. Poe ignored them and stood by the window.

At that moment, the splatter gun came in to view, with the three prisoners on it. Poe saw Brennick raise his strike clone gun and fire a series of bullets in a broad circle. He then bashed the window with the side of the gun and it shattered with a deafening crash. He ducked for cover as Brennick, Nino and D-Day jumped from the splatter gun and burst into the chamber.

Brennick trained his gun on Poe, who sat up in his chair.

"Keep your hands off the keyboard," he shouted.

"Brennick," yelled Nino, who had found Abraham.

Keeping Poe in his sight, he bent to the trustee, dropping down on a knee to cradle Abraham's head. "Forgive me," he said.

Abraham opened his eyes, moved his head a little to see Brennick better.

"Nothing to forgive, man," he whispered, and shut his eyes. His breathing ceased.

Brennick rose, and stared at Poe. "You're gonna pay, you bastard." He shouted, "Karen!" then turned back to Poe. "Where is she?"

His fingers tightened on his gun.

"Would you like to see your wife?" Poe lifted an arm and pointed to a monitor.

Brennick turned, and saw Karen struggling with two medical trustees, as she was hustled through a doorway labeled Delivery Level A.

"The only one who survives this operation is the baby. Release me, or she dies."

"She dies, you die," Brennick said, looking at Poe with contempt. He jammed the barrel of the gun under his chin. "Tell them to stop."

Poe hesitated.

"Now."

"Zed. Cease delivery."

"I'm sorry," Zed said. "I do not recognize the command."

The monitor revealed Karen being forced onto the operating table: The trustees fixed shackles to her legs and arms, so that she was spreadeagled on her back.

"Recognize this." He fired a warning shot over Poe's head. "Now once more. With feeling."

"Zed. Please." Poe pleaded.

"Men-Tel will not negotiate during a hostage situation," Zed-10 said implacably.

Brennick made a decision and beckoned to D-day and Nino.

"We're going to delivery. Now."

Poe stood up, in time to see the splatter gun rising and aiming its barrel directly at him. A look of sheer horror formed on his face, and then the splatter gun fired. There was a dull thud, and the top of his body was obliterated. The rest of Poe slowly fell over, revealing wires and tubing spurting blue liquid. An acrid stench of burning plastic filled the room.

Brennick dived out of range of the gun, while D-Day asked pointlessly:

"What's going on?"

On the monitor they saw Karen's gown being lifted. Then a grid of light was projected onto her belly.

"Get me to the computer," D-Day said. "Big Mama's the one running the show. She's the one we got to fuck up."

Brennick took D-Day by the arm and led him into Central Control, seating him at the keyboard.

"Feedback virus." he muttered to himself. "In-fucking-capacitating."

He commenced keying in commands, trying to find the password, his eyes staring more inward than at the keyboard. Every so often he glanced up to the monitor, where Karen was now having her stomach swabbed, with a yellow fluid. Disinfectant. The other trustee reached for his scalpel.

There was a loud crash behind him, and bullets whistled around him. Two strike clones burst into the chamber. Immediately Brennick was firing, spinning to face them, blasting one of the strike clones. Its black chest received the hit and smashed, the body falling. It twitched on the floor. The other strike clone raced for Central Control, firing as it went. The noise was deafening, as bullets ricocheted in the small chamber.

D-Day feverishly worked the keyboard, his face in a sweat, as on the screen the trustee picked up the scalpel, turning calmly and saying something to the other trustee.

"Got it," D-Day yelled above the din. "'Crime Does Not Pay'."

He keyed in a series of commands.

A bullet hit him in the shoulder, knocking him off his chair. Brennick fired back at the clone and hit him before he could shoot Nino. The clone collapsed in a spurt of blue fluid. Other clones approached outside the room.

On the floor, D-day lay on his back. He called out:

"Lift me up."

On the monitor the trustee moved his scalpel towards Karen's belly.

Nino grabbed D-Day under the shoulders, and D-Day cried out in pain.

"The left one, man."

Nino felt wetness under the left shoulder and lifted the right side, so that Nino was half on the chair. The room was full of acrid smoke.

D-Day reached out with his right hand and pressed one key.

Immediately the approaching strike clones froze. The monitors went black, and Brennick could not see what was happening to Karen.

D-Day fell forward, his face over the keyboard. Nino, still half holding him, blanched.

D-Day was dead.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death. Amen." He spoke half mockingly, bitterly, unable to show his pain.

"Amen," Brennick said, and placed his hand on shoulder, easing him away from the dead man. "We gotta move out. I'll meet you in transport. We're going out the way we came in."

They climbed out of the ruin of Central Control, and faced the frozen clones. Brennick raised his machine gun and blasted them.

The lights were switching on and off, and the doors were opening and shutting. They waited for the doors, and jumped through out into the corridor as they opened, then raced towards the delivery room.

They ran down the corridor, turned left and saw the door to the ward was shut. Brennick pushed against the door, but it would not budge. He moved back to take a run at it when it opened spasmodically. Quickly he ran through.

As the door opened, the lights came on, and Brennick saw Karen strapped to the table. The shackles at her feet unlocked in the electrical confusion, and she kicked out, catching the trustee in the elbow and knocking him backwards.

"John," she called out as Brennick burst in. "I'm here, John."

A malfunctioning strike clone zigzagged through the door, firing randomly. Brennick raised his gun to fire, but with a jarring screech of metal on metal it was flicked from his arms by a stray hit. He flung himself at the floor, in the direction of the gun.

The two trustees meanwhile grasped hold of Karen, and despite her struggling forced her back on the table.

Brennick reached his gun, grabbed it and rolled over at the same time. He fired and caught the berserk clone in the head, knocking it over in yet another spurt of blue fluid. It tumbled to the floor, still firing, then was still.

Brennick got to his knees and aimed at the two trustees wrestling with Karen.

"Release her." Panting, he could barely get the words out. The trustees stepped back, arms raised. Karen slid off the table, pulling her robe down, and joined Brennick. They glanced back, and raced outside.

From the corridor, the expanse of the prison was visible. It was in chaos.

Lights still flicked on, then off. Bridges from the central core extended and contracted. Elevator doors opened and closed, fans stopped and started. There was smoke and dust, and over everything was the roar of thousands of men and women screaming, cheering, shouting, cursing, crying, stomping.

The laser bars of cells switched off, and on, and prisoners yelled as they gained freedom from their cells. Brennick saw a man dash through as the red laser bars disappeared, and beckoned to his cellmate. The second prisoner picked up something from his bedding and followed, to be cut down in a curdling shriek by the lasers as they reactivated. The shriek itself was drowned in more screams and exultant shouts as others took the risk and escaped.

A group of prisoners fought for space in an elevator, which began to rise with its door open. It gained one level, then two, and then fell like a stone into the depths.

Brennick and Karen made their way past the admissions area, and reached the loading dock. The huge lights built into the ceiling flashed slowly on and off, with no particular rhythm.

Near the open gate stood a truck similar to the one they had arrived in. Brennick heard a yell and saw Nino, who ran over to join them.

Reaching the driver's side, Brennick clambered up and opened the cabin door. It was empty. He reached down and hauled Karen up, started the motor. Nino climbed in after her, and took the wheel. Nino engaged the gears. The engine roared throatily and the huge vehicle slowly commenced moving towards the blinding sunlight through the open door. As it slowly gathered momentum, the giant loading dock door started to close.

Zed-10's voice suddenly became coherent and spoke:

"No-one escapes the Fortress. Crime does not pay."

Nino changed gears, and slowly the truck moved through the doors. There was a grinding crunch. The shutting door caught the truck like a trap clamping on the neck of a rabbit.

For a moment, the truck's wheels span, and motor whined. Then the truck jerked forward, decapitated, leaving the trailer behind. They roared up the ramp and into the desert.

"How far to the border?" Nino asked.

They had been driving for the best part of the day.

Brennick gazed out at the desert, featureless except for a few straggly plants and an occasional tree on the horizon. After the months of artificial light inside the Fortress, the blueness of the sky was incredible, like a child's colouring in book. He gazed ahead towards the horizon, searching for a familiar landmark.

"Thirty miles, I think. We'll make it."

"I don't think so," Karen said. She cradled her belly. "My water's broken."

Brennick took her hand, gripping it.

"We'll get there," he repeated. "We'll fucking get there."

He burst out laughing, and Nino blasted the horn.

Looming ahead was a dark line stretching across the horizon.

"There's our border."

In twenty minutes they could make out a wire fence, as tall as the truck. Nino put his foot down and the truck raced towards it. The fence crossed the road, and the truck tore through it as if it were a spider's web, and burst into freedom.

"We made it. We're over the border."

Nino let out a whoop of delight and pounded the dashboard.

Karen winced, then relaxed. She breathed slowly out through her teeth.

"They're coming closer and closer together." She turned to Nino. "We're over the border. We've got to stop."

Nino squinted into the distance, as the truck roared down the dusty highway.

"Something's there," he said.

Brennick could make out the outline of a house.

Nino slowed down the truck down, clashing through the gears, and brought it roaring to rest out in front of the house. Close up, with the dust from the truck swirling around, he could see it was more of a shack, built of wood. It must have been decades since it was painted, for there was no way of knowing what its original colour might have been. The bare wood was worn grey from the weather, with odd bits of paint still stuck to it near the corners. There were a couple of bushy dark green plants near the front door, overgrown garden beds and an unkempt lawn. There were two front windows with glass in them, and a plain wood front door.

Nino switched off the engine. There were slight spitting sounds as the engine cooled, and finally complete silence. The sun beat down out of the featureless blue sky, and they stared at the shack, looking for signs of life.

They waited a minute that seemed an hour, and there was no sign of any movement at the house.

Brennick jumped down and approached the front door. He knocked. Waited. There was no response. He knocked again, louder, and the door swung open, creaking on rusted hinges. Cautiously he put his head into the doorway and peered into the relative gloom.

"It looks like we're in luck. It's deserted," he called over his shoulder to the other two.

He walked into the house, and his eyes slowly adjusted to the dark. Looking around, he saw he was standing in what must have been the main living room. It still had a couple of old armchairs in it, and a couch with the springs showing. A door at the back of the room led into a short hall with two small bedrooms on one side and a kitchen, sun room and bathroom on the other. The whole place was dusty, but it seemed clean.

He went back out into the sun.

"Looks okay. Come on in."

He walked up to the truck and helped Karen down. Arm in arm they entered the house. Nino followed, kicking his toe in the dust.

Brennick made up a makeshift bed in one of the bedrooms, using a blanket from the truck.

Karen lay on her side, her contractions now coming a minute apart. She grabbed Nino's hand for extra support. "I don't know your real name."

"Nino. Just call me Nino." He shrugged.

"That's what you call a child," Brennick said. "You're a man."

Nino looked up, pulled back his shoulders. "My name's Miguel." In saying it he seemed to realize he had grown up. He stood up, paced around the room, then came back and stood by the two of them.

"Listen, Cap. I'm hitting the road." He gave the thumbs up sign with his right hand, and grinned. "Remember – you got me out." He punched Brennick on the shoulder, and squeezed Karen's hand.

"You got yourself out," Brennick corrected. He looked at the boy for a long time, then clapped him on the shoulder.

"I'll leave you the truck."

"Thanks." Brennick smiled.

"Hey," Nino said, a thought occurring to him. "What you gonna feed the baby?"

"Me," Karen said, and winced as a contraction came again.

"Of course. I knew that. So I'm gonna see you, right?"

"We'll find you," Brennick promised.

"No. I'll find you." Nino grinned. Then he turned and walked out of the room and out the front door. At the door he hesitated a moment, then started walking away into the distance. After he'd gone about fifty paces he turned again, waved, and then continued.

Later that day, Karen's contractions were coming strongly and regularly. She breathed shallowly, panting, her body perspiring. Brennick felt helpless, but tried to soothe her head on his shoulder.

"You're going to be fine. The baby's going to be fine."

"That's what I kept saying. All the time inside. Only I got to tell you. I got a little scared there at the end."

"You're *never* scared," he said, starting their game.

"Except ... when ... you're scared," Karen panted the words out in time with her contractions.

"Then I guess you were scared," he said, grinning, in a soft voice.

"Then ... I ... guess ... I was." She gave herself over to the contractions.

John cradled the baby in his arms. Behind him, on the blanket, Karen lay back. She was exhausted from the delivery, but she was triumphant.

"What are we going to call her?" he asked her.

The baby cried.

"How about Nina?" she said.

He thought for a while, while the baby continued to wail.

"It'll do for the time being, I guess," he said. He rubbed her back, but he could not comfort her, so he handed her back down to Karen, helping her sit up. She put Nina on her breast, painful with milk, and she immediately started sucking, her crying forgotten.

They had won through, and life was beginning again for the three of them. Now he had to find some food.